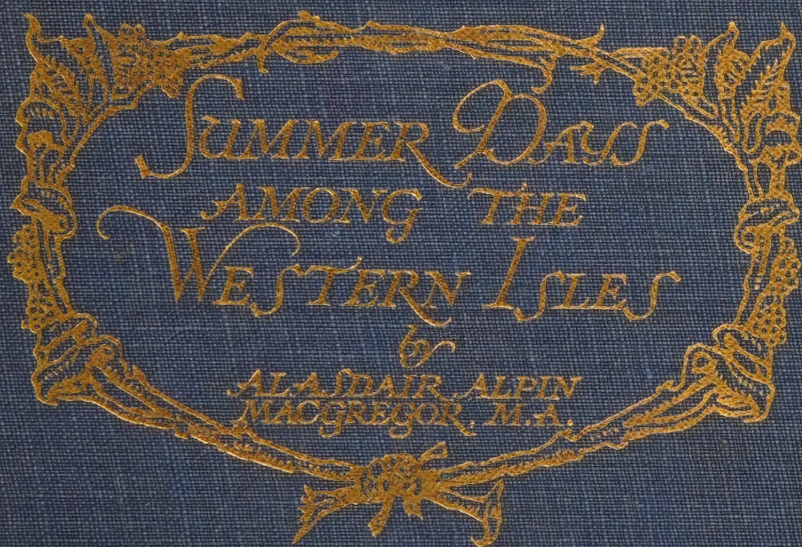
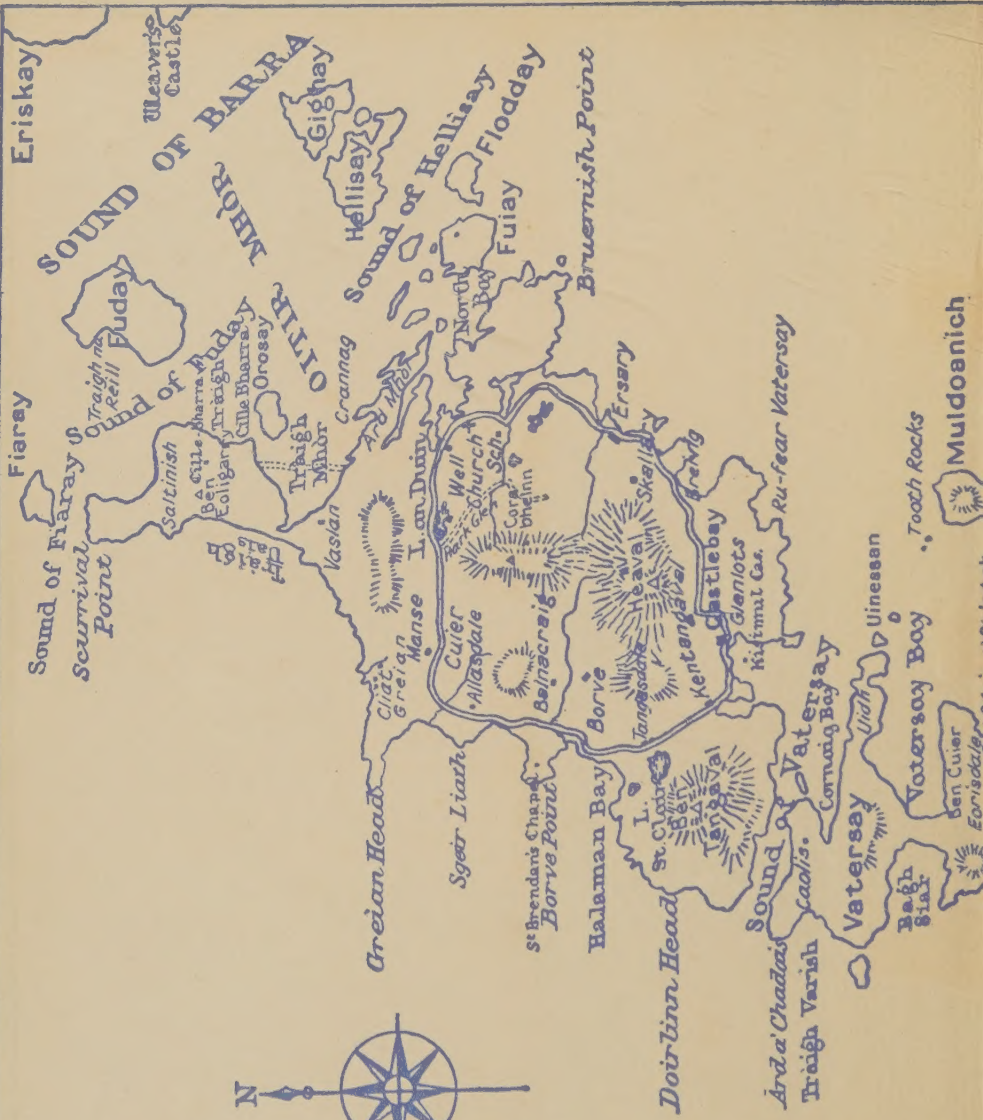
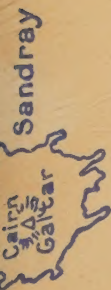




SUMMER DAYS
AMONG THE
WESTERN ISLES

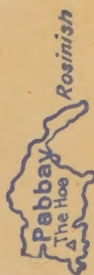
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ALASDAIR ALPIN
MACGREGOR, M.A.





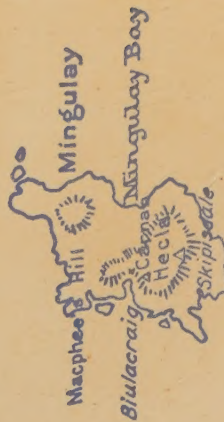
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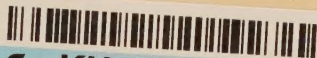
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Sound of Berneray



Barra Head

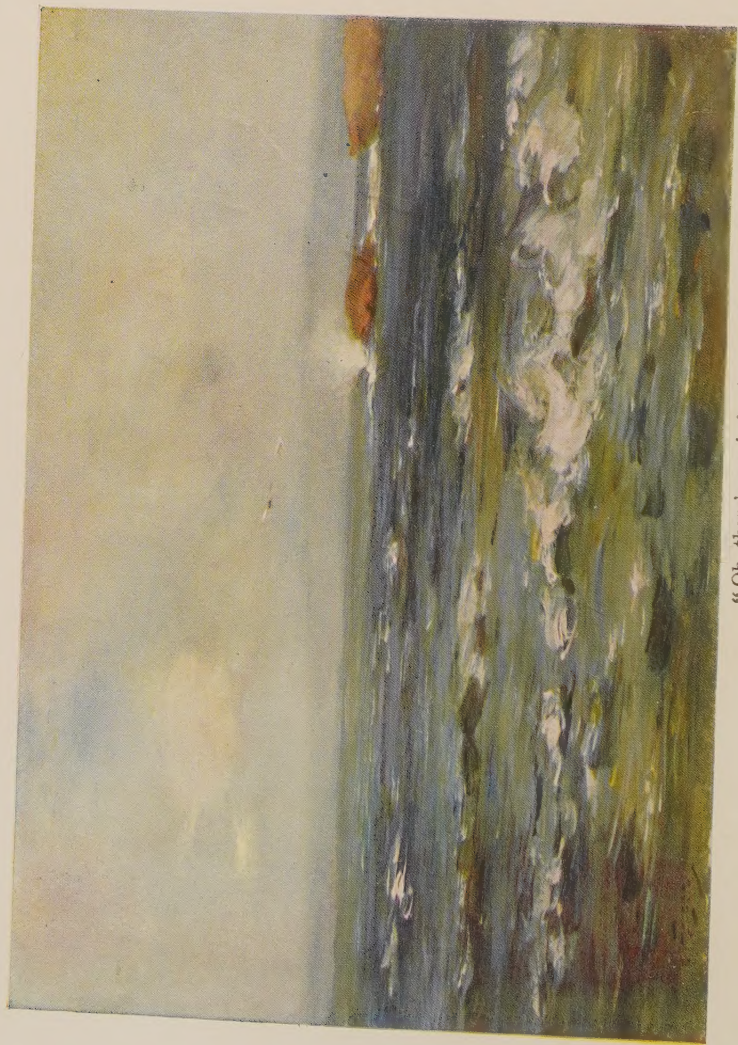


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SUMMER DAYS AMONG
THE WESTERN ISLES

A. Smart:
From Eva.

Albion }
Augt. 1930 }



"Oh, there's music in the wind and there's music in the sea;
And the rapture of the tide is putting love on me."

From the painting by W. M. FRAZER, R.S.A.

SUMMER DAYS AMONG THE WESTERN ISLES

By

ALASDAIR ALPIN MACGREGOR, M.A.

AUTHOR OF "BEHOLD THE HEBRIDES!" "OVER
THE SEA TO SKYE," "WILD DRUMALBAIN," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED FROM 56
PHOTOGRAPHS (48 BY THE
AUTHOR), AND WITH A
FRONTISPIECE IN COLOUR
BY W. M. FRAZER, R.S.A.

EDINBURGH AND LONDON
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TO

MY GAELIC FRIEND

IAIN MAC GHILLE MHUIRE, AM PIOBAIRE

JOHN MORRISON, THE PIPER,

for auld lang syne, and those dreamy days at the remote sheep-farm of Galson, in the Lewis ; for the welcome he aye extends to the fisherman returning home with or without fish ; in respect of his contention that “ every man is a king in his own house ” ; in respect of what he has done in the Lewis on behalf of pipe-music and the ancient art of the pibroch ; for his having broken in upon many a conversation with odd bars of *cainntearachd* ; for his having found my lost collie, Torquil, among the whins at Mossend, early one summer morning ; in remembrance of our nine days’ search for his English setter, Rye ; in remembrance of a lazy autumn day at the Willow Glen hay, when we looked on while others worked ; in remembrance of journeys to the machar at Coll and Gress, and our long tramp through wet heather and cotton-grass to the eagle-haunted steeps of Dun Othail ; in remembrance of a wild, wet day at Rodil, and a midnight adventure among the Harris Hills ; in remembrance of a noontide dreamed away by the white sands at Luskentyre, in the Harris ; and in deference to the open door at Assynt House, in the mystical Isle of Lewis—all of which things I may be telling you about at another time.

“ The seasons change, the winds they shift and veer ;
The grass of yesteryear
Is dead ; the birds depart, the groves decay :
Empires dissolve and peoples disappear :
Song passes not away.”

WILLIAM WATSON.

P R E F A C E

FOR permission to reprint such chapters as already have appeared in somewhat abbreviated form, acknowledgment is made, as aforetime, to the Editors of *Chambers's Journal*, *Edinburgh Evening News*, *Glasgow Weekly Herald*, *Scots Magazine*, *Scotsman*, *Scots Observer*, and *Scottish Field*.

In addition, my thanks are due again to Alasdair MacFarlane, Esq., M.A., who read the proofs, to Mr. John MacKenzie, Dunvegan, for his having lent me the photograph of his late aunt, Miss Frances Tolmie, and to the MacNeil of Barra for his having sent me the charming photograph of himself. In deference to Alasdair MacFarlane, who for years has been my most intimate friend and official adviser, let me say that such syntactic discrepancies as the text may now betray arise from my being particularly obstinate by nature.

With reference to the volume itself, I must add that I have not strained at text-book accuracy: nor yet have I endeavoured to embrace *everything* that might be written of the Isles; but I would have you read these pages in the spirit in which they were written. They were written for the sheer joy experienced in the writing of them. And, if the reader derive from the reading of them something of the atmosphere I revelled in during the writing of them, he will derive from them what they are designed to impart. However far short of attaining my purpose I may have fallen, it is my sincere wish that this volume should breathe

of heather and peat-reek ; of summer and sea-tangle ; of crimson and creamy clover ; of long, luscious grass ; of peace and goodwill ; of quietude and contentment ; of the old loves of an old people ; and of all the other lovely things that, inasmuch as they appeal only to the senses, are more precious than pearls of great price, and more to be desired than gold.

With regard to the photographs reproduced here, I confess to being a little in danger of becoming conceited. From the point of view of photography, the scenic composition of the Outer Hebrides is entrancing. And I am thinking that those, who may be bored with the letter-press, will capture something of the inimitable spirit of the Western Isles from these photographs. In this era of avarice, cruelty, and ugliness, let those of us who are imbued with a sense of beauty and artistry do all that in us lies to create beautiful and artistic things, to think our thoughts in terms of beauty, and to initiate our less fortunate fellows into the mystery of appreciating beautiful things and thinking beautiful thoughts.

You will get the gist of what I am driving at, if you be sensible to the poetry of the illustration facing page 37. Excepting, perhaps, the Great Cockle Shore of Barra, Kisimul Castle in the late summer afternoon, when the tide is full and almost without a ripple on it, is, I think, the most perfect setting I have ever beheld. And I am confident that, if you gaze into this picture for long enough, it will be putting the spell of love on the most prosaic and unromantic of you.

ALASDAIR ALPIN MACGREGOR.

"THE WHINS," MIDLOTHIAN,
January 1929.

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And the rapture of the tide is putting love on me."

From the painting by W. M. Frazer, R.S.A. . . . Frontispiece

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CEOL-MARA

(Sea-Music)

Listen to the frozen wind that comes from northern lands,
With his ice-tinged pulse and his uninviting roar :
Hearken to the breakers as they spill upon the sands,
And dash themselves in splinters round the wrack-reefed shore.
Oh, there's music in the wind and there's music in the sea ;
And the rapture of the tide is putting love on me.

There's music in the cavern where the Viking rievers dwelled
'Mid their rich sea-spoil, that lay strewn upon its floor ;
While their galleys, treasure-laden with the wanderlust of eld,
Rocked restlessly at anchor round the foam-laved shore.
Oh, there's music in the wind ; but the shingling of the sea
And the lapping of the tide are putting sleep on me.

ALASDAIR ALPIN MACGREGOR.

SUMMER DAYS AMONG THE WESTERN ISLES

I

BLUE BARRA OF THE WAVES

AN ISLE OF ENCHANTMENT

LOCATED to the southward of the world-old chain of islands stretching considerably more than a hundred miles from the Butt of Lewis to Barra Head, on the unpeopled Island of Berneray, and accounting for the major portion of the twenty-two thousand acres comprising the Parish of the Barra Isles, is the Island of Barra proper.

On the origin of the name, Barra, etymologists have not departed from their wont of being at variance. Some there are who incline to associate it with *barr*, a Gaelic word denoting a point or extremity. Others ascribe its origin to St. Barr, the tutelar saint of the Barra Isles, whose name still occupies a prominent place in the ecclesiological lore of this region, and in whose honour the northern peninsula of the Island of Barra formerly was called Kilbar (*Cille-bharra*).

However, the theory that Barra is derived from the Icelandic *bara*, a wave-billow, or a wave driven before the wind, appears to have met with more general acceptance. Thus Barra would seem to signify the "storm-tossed

island," an appellation the appositeness of which is appreciated by any one who is thoroughly familiar with its seaboard. The probability is that Barra in the Outer Hebrides, Burray in the Orkneys, and Burra in the Shetland Islands are derived from a common source connoting "storm-tossed."

Barra in the Sagas

Our knowledge of the very early history of Barra is scanty. Yet the sagas show that by no means was this Isle neglected by the Norse. A recent article contributed to the *Oban Times* from New York alluded to some of the Norse references to Barra during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. In the *Grettis Saga* (A.D. 1010-30), for example, an account is given of a Barra woman named Aldis Konalsdottir and her ancestry. From this Saga we also learn that Barra was the rendezvous of Viking pirates, and that Aldis's uncle, Ofeigr Grettir, and his kin harried both the mainland of Scotland and the islands lying "west beyond the sea."

The same authority informs us that the Vikings plundered and harried during the summer, and resided in Barra during the winter.

Furthermore, in the *Grettis Saga* it is recorded how Onund and his Viking confederates possessed five well-armed ships; "and therewith they harried in the South-isles (*i.e.*, the Hebrides and as far south as the Isle of Man), and when they came to Barra they found there a king called Kiarval, and he too had five ships." And in a naval fight that ensued Onund and his allies were successful in seizing four of Kiarval's ships, and a great deal of wealth to boot.



A TYPICAL HEBRIDEAN HOMESTEAD IN THE SHELTER OF BEN SCURRIVAL, ISLE OF BARRA.

And, then, at a feast in Iceland in 1120, poems by Orm of Barra were recited.

Inscription of Runes

An interesting memorial of the Norse occupation of Barra exists in the sculptured stone discovered in 1865 by the late Alexander Carmichael in the old burial-ground of Kilbar, and now preserved in the National Museum of Antiquities at Edinburgh. The stone is an upright cross-slab of greenish slate, and measures roughly four and a half feet in height, twelve inches in breadth, and ten inches in thickness. On the back of it is an inscription of runes in two lines, reading vertically from the top of the stone downwards as follows :

UR . ThUR . KIRThU : STANIR :
 Ur and Thur set up [these] stones

RISKURS : S[IE] : [K]RISTR : . . .
 of Riskur May Christ [guard his soul]

This Kilbar monolith is regarded as being a Norse stone of the eleventh century. In its decorative designs it is curiously illustrative of the intermingling of Celtic and Scandinavian styles. This is the only rune-inscribed stone known to have existed in the Outer Hebrides. Its runes are somewhat obscure ; and up to the present no really satisfactory reading of them has been made.

Strange, is it not, that, whereas the Viking rievrs have left their place-names profusely sprinkled all over the Outer Isles, the stone found in the churchyard at Kilbar should be the only tangible memorial of a domination that extended over four and a half centuries ? To some extent

the absence of Viking memorials in the Outer Isles has been explained by the supposition that the Northmen's edifices were built of wood. Thus, all traces of their architecture and carving, secular and ecclesiastical alike, have vanished with these perishable wooden structures. But, even with regard to the Kilbar stone, authorities are of opinion that the erection of sculptured stones was *not* a native Scandinavian custom, but one which the settlers adopted through contact with the Celts.

My own humble impression is that the Kilbar stone was pillaged elsewhere, and carried off to Barra. The folk-tales of the Barra Isles, however, are far from devoid of allusions to the Norse occupation. For instance, tradition in northern Barra and in South Uist has it that the human bones and weapons, reported to have been discovered in the belt of blown sand crossing the Island of Fuday, are those of the Norsemen who, after the battle of Largs, made a last stand on Fuday, where they were slaughtered to a man by the inhabitants. And to this very day the natives of Fuday are peculiarly averse to disturbing these bones in any way, and to allowing strangers to remove them.

An Isle of Varied Interest

Although of no great dimensions, Barra may be regarded as demonstrating to an unusual degree the general physical features of the Hebrides : in scenic variety and beauty few islands of its size can compete with it. Moreover, it may be urged that in no other island can the social and economic conditions prevailing in the Western Isles be observed to better advantage, and with such comparative ease : within the ambit of this Island—whose maximum length

roughly is nine miles, and whose breadth varies from about five miles to a few hundred yards—may be found not only the vast variety of activities in which the Hebridean people is engaged at different seasons of the year, but also many precious fragments of the rites and customs that have survived the decay and dissolution of the old Celtic Church. In this latter respect Barra, for its size, is unique.

And, then, it may be said that Barra is synonymous with all the most beautiful things intermingled with the Hebrides: being steeped in centuries of Hebridean song and story, this Island has contributed much to the poetry and pageantry of the Western Isles.

Blue Waves and Skies

With the remainder of the Outer Isles, Barra shares the distinction of being almost treeless. Yet it cannot be said that this Island exhibits the slightest suspicion of monotony. The greater part of its surface lies less than 250 feet above sea-level. The interior is mountainous; and two hills, Heaval and Ben Tangval, reach an altitude of 1,200 and 1,092 feet respectively. The coast-line is diversified with fiords and sandy inlets, with wrack-sprent creeks and echoing caves, with innumerable islets and reefs, with snowy billows, and with cerulean waves such as one might associate more readily with midsummer in the Ægean.

To these pages I have given the title of “Blue Barra of the Waves,” because I am acquainted with no place where, under ethereal conditions, the waves are a more exhilarating blue: there is something alluring and entrancing about the blue waves of Barra. Blue, too, are the skies that canopy Barra in summer, and lend heavenly peace and

softness to the great plains of the Atlantic, undulating leagues upon leagues to the westward of it, in the air of Tir-nan-Og and the Land-without-Night.

A Treeless Isle

Except for the almost negligible plantation in the defile down which the road passes to North Bay, and for the patch of Scots firs in a sheltered coomb above the bend in the road at Ard Mhor, barely a tree is to be seen in Barra. Even the trees aforementioned are puny in stature and wind-harassed, and have been left slantwise by the gales of many Hebridean winters. Another small plantation is to be found beyond the Glen, at Creachan, just before descending the rough mountain-road to Ersary.

That in common with the rest of the Hebrides the soil of Barra once supported vast forests and a luxuriant vegetation is evinced by its almost inexhaustible peat deposits. The peats of Barra are jet-black; and, when properly regulated, they burn better and longer than would the same volume of coal. Over the latter they have the advantage of cleanness and lightness, and of being won under conditions more amenable than those prevailing in any coal mine.

Timber not being procurable locally, the little wood used occasionally in the kindling of a fire is obtained from the wrecks of vessels, from the odd pieces of timber cast upon the shores of Barra from time to time by heavy seas, and by conserving old beams, rafters, and oars. In times past the Hebrideans, accepting the inevitability of shipwrecks, prayed that the same should occur on their coasts, so that thereby they might be compensated to some degree for the absence of native timber.

Profusion of Wild Flowers

Conditions which are unfavourable to the growth of trees seldom conduce to fecundity in the lesser forms of vegetation. Wherefore Barra possesses very few gardens in the modern sense of the term. In summer-time flowers deck the plots in front of many of the newer dwelling-houses in Castlebay—the chief centre of population and activity in the Island of Barra, and the port through which most of its external traffic passes. But the writer was pleasantly surprised both at the variety and profusion of plant life in a garden at North Bay belonging to Father MacDonald. The protection afforded by the wall surrounding this garden is responsible for the size of the marigolds I saw there last summer, as also for the healthy clusters of veronica in flower. But what most attracted my attention in this garden was an apple-tree bearing at least six pounds of fruit. Time was when, in the walled garden laid out at Eoligarry by the old MacNeils of Barra, great quantities of fruit were grown. To-day the garden at Eoligarry is a pathetic wilderness of grasses and weeds, and of trees and shrubs that winter winds and storms have stunted and seared. Nowhere can the climatic change, that the Hebrides have experienced during the last fifty years, be better demonstrated than in the old garden at Eoligarry, in the north of Barra.

Still, one marvels at the abundance and variety of wild flowers that in June and July are to be found on the hill-sides and machar of Barra, and particularly among the rich pastures of the Kilbar peninsula. One day last June I plucked no fewer than forty species of wild flowers in a

field at Borge, and within a radius of two yards ; and the same day, when pottering among the ferns clothing the sylvan part of the valley, down which a brook flows parallel to the west-going road to North Bay, I discovered a frond measuring fifty-three inches in length.

The Passing of the Old Highland Farm

Speaking generally, the configuration of the ground and the geological aspect of Blue Barra of the Waves render it better adapted to pasturage than to tillage. Excepting the farm of Eoligarra, which has been broken up recently to provide small-holdings, there are no farms in Barra, though about 1794 there were as many as five. This is due largely to the fact that, excluding parts of the Kilbar peninsula, topographical features do not lend themselves readily to husbandry on an extensive scale. On the other hand, geognostic and climatic conditions make the greater part of the Island totally unsuitable for intensive cultivation in the sense in which that term is accepted by the political economist. The law of increasing cost and diminishing return would soon be found to operate in the case of most cultivable land in Barra.

Recent decades have sounded the death-knell of many an old Highland farm in the Outer Isles ; and with the passing of these farms regular systems of agriculture also have disappeared to a large extent. Whether good or evil ultimately will emanate from this alteration in the rural structure of the Hebrides is still largely a matter of conjecture. The points for and against the extension of the small-holdings system under existing conditions are too numerous and too involved to be dealt with in these pages ;

but, to any one who is thinking ahead, and who can arrange the pros and cons in their proper order and perspective, it must be patent that before long a saner policy must supplement or supersede the present one.

Black Cattle and Highland Ponies

The arable land cultivated by the typical Barra crofter is small in area. A certain amount of grain is raised yearly on his "lazy-beds" and strips of "skinned-lands." But neither the soil nor the crofter's methods of husbandry are favourable to the reaping of more than a scanty harvest on his holding. However, Barra possesses a fair proportion of good grazing ground, much of which consists of machar land and hill pasture. The bulk of this grazing is held in common by the respective townships to which it is allotted by the Board of Agriculture and the Land Court.

Dr. Johnson tells us that on the Isle of Barra were reared "very little cows," and a race of horses "of which the highest is not above thirty-six inches." Until recent years Barra was noted for black cattle and sturdy Highland ponies; but its distance from the mainland marts and trysts, and its insular situation, prevented prize cattle reared on it from advancing in price to the same extent as did the cattle reared on less remote pastures. Drovers used to visit Barra at stated periods of the year to buy black cattle; and, when purchasing them, they took into account their own personal and travelling expenses, the cost of shipping the cattle to the mainland (usually 3/- per head), and the risk of losing one or two during the voyage across the Minch.

Subdivision of Large Holdings

In the eighteenth century no tenant in Barra rented more than a half-penny, the souming of which was definitely fixed. According to a census taken in 1755, the population of Barra was 1,150. By the close of the same century it fell slightly short of 2,000. A population of 2,097 in 1831 declined to 1,853 in 1861. The census of 1901 revealed the population of the Parish of Barra to be 2,542. The increase during the early years of the nineteenth century necessitated the proprietor's subdividing the larger holdings. The tenant renting a whole penny was the first to suffer through this redistribution of land. In the re-allocation some received no more than a fourth or an eighth of a penny.

"Weed in the Drawing Wave"

In the olden time the natives of the Western Isles used to fertilise the soil extensively with sea-ware. In a way similar to that in which they prayed that the wrecks of wooden vessels might be cast upon their shores, they invoked the Deity in the hope that great quantities of sea-wrack might be left by the falling tide. It was customary in those days for a man to walk into the sea up to the waist between Wednesday and Thursday, and to pour out whatever libation he carried, repeating an appropriate rune, the theme of which was taken up by the isles-folk who foregathered on the shore in the darkness to chant the invocation. They prayed the God of the Sea

"To put weed in the drawing wave
To enrich the ground,
To shower on us food."



A FOAL AT BORVE INSPECTS THE CAMERA.

In Barra and in Uist ponies were used largely in leading this sea-weed from the shore to the crofting townships.

Agriculture Neglected for Kelp

The growth of the kelp industry in the Western Isles resulted in a serious decrease in the quantity of sea-ware used for manuring the ground. Indeed, for a time the manufacture of kelp was so lucrative that Hebridean proprietors prohibited the cutting of sea-weed for agricultural purposes. This restriction produced a well-marked decline in the fertility of a soil that, even under improved agrestic conditions, leaves much to be desired.

Though fishing has always been a supplementary source of livelihood in the Barra Isles, for a time the selling of their black cattle and the short-lived success of the kelp industry enabled the Islanders to meet all their obligations to the proprietor.

Nowadays the practice of manuring the soil with sea-weed has become obsolete in many parts of the Outer Isles, as has also the manufacture of kelp.

The Religion of the People

But for a few families of the Protestant persuasion, the inhabitants of the Barra Isles are Roman Catholics. The peasant women go to chapel with their shawls neatly folded over their heads; and the fact that the crofter-fishermen may have no grand clothes—no “Sunday best”—is no deterrent to their accompanying them. During the fishing season the Protestant ranks are augmented considerably by contingents of East Coast fishermen who attend worship

at the Parish Church in Castlebay, irrespective of the indifferent condition of their clothing. Unconsciously one feels about these men a more real sincerity than is to be found in the typical *quoad omnia* city church, which frequently is conducted more on the lines of a west-end club than in keeping with what ought to be expected of an organisation existing ostensibly for the propagation of Christianity.

It is held that, after the Reformation, Protestantism was the predominant faith in Barra until about the time of the Restoration (1660). This theory is substantiated in one of the appendices to Thomas Pennant's *Tour in Scotland*, and also in the *Old Statistical Account*. The former authority states that Barra was a Protestant island till the reign of Charles II., during which a number of Romanist missionaries, taking advantage of the neglect and misconduct of the parish minister, went over to the Barra Isles, and succeeded in bringing back the inhabitants to their pristine beliefs.

An Industrial Boom

Since Barra enjoyed, with the remainder of the Hebrides, the prosperity coincident with the successful prosecution of the kelp industry, it was inevitable that it should participate in the calamities following upon the decay of that industry. A knowledge of how to extract iodine from seaweed followed the potato from Ireland. Kelp began to be manufactured in North Uist about 1735. Soon afterwards it made its way to Barra. From economic and social standpoints, momentous changes were wrought in the Outer Isles by the introduction of this industry. Its effects on the life and livelihood of the people were far-reaching,

for it ushered in a period of prosperity which, for a time at all events, seemed to solve the problems that for generations had confronted both landlord and tenant in the Hebrides. The early years of the nineteenth century witnessed the high-water mark of this tide of prosperity, when an average of £20 per ton was paid for kelp. It has been estimated that in the year 1812 the net value of kelp produced in North Uist alone fell not far short of £14,000, the abnormal demand owing to the Napoleonic wars having increased its value out of all proportion. Two decades later the price of kelp had been decimated: in 1832 it realised less than £2 per ton. A variety of causes had contributed to its decline. Among the more obvious may be enumerated the repeal of the duty on imported salt, and the removal of the high tariff on Spanish barilla. But for the increase in the use of iodine about this time, the manufacture of kelp in the Western Isles certainly would have ceased there and then.

A Catalogue of Misfortunes

The death-blow to the kelp industry in the Highlands and Islands was dealt in 1875, the year in which iodine commenced to be imported from Chile and Peru. Attempts to resuscitate the industry proved of little avail; and, consequently, landlord and tenant found themselves faced with starvation. While the boom continued, neither proprietor nor crofter dreamed that hard times might overtake them. Wherefore they lived to rue their thriftlessness in the balmy days of kelp, and the fact that they had neglected agriculture for a source of revenue that now was non-existent. With the bursting of the kelp bubble, the people

of Barra was deprived of a once lucrative source of income. Misfortune followed misfortune. Every penny that General MacNeil of Barra had sunk in the erection of chemical works for the making of soap from kelp was lost.

The next chapter in the economic prostration of Barra was what William Cook MacKenzie aptly alludes to as the proprietor's "crowning mercy." I refer to the compulsory emigration from Barra, South Uist, and Benbecula under the direction of Colonel Gordon of Cluny, who succeeded the MacNeils as proprietor of Barra when, in 1838, the last MacNeil was compelled to part with his inheritance.

The nineteenth century witnessed a radical change in the proprietary of lands in Scotland—a change that in the West Highlands and Hebrides was as decisive as it was deplorable. The old landlords of any personality or breeding became mere historical figures: their lineage was displaced by brewers and distillers, bankers and brokers, merchants, iron and steel magnates, and opulent manufacturers.

A Hospitable People

By way of bringing this introductory dissertation to an appropriate conclusion, a few observations regarding the present-day inhabitants of Blue Barra of the Waves may not be deemed out of place.

Though in recent years the older dwellings in the village of Castlebay have been superseded by houses of a modern type, the majority of the people lives in the unduly maligned "black houses" which are so conspicuous a feature of the Western Isles, and which in some respects are admirably suited to their environment.

With few exceptions, the inhabitants derive their liveli-

hood solely from crofting and fishing and their seasonal employment at the curing stations. They are distinguished by that kindness and hospitality to strangers which is so essential a trait in the Highland stock. As a rule, the crofter-fisherman of Barra possesses little either in money or in kind ; but he is willing at all times to entertain the stranger to such as he may have. More than adequately outweighed in service and willingness is the fact that he may be unable to offer his guest very much in the way of exchangeable commodities. He will put himself to no end of bother to ferry you over from one island to another, or to escort you a good part of the way through difficult country, until he has seen you on a track from which only carelessness and crass stupidity would tempt you to depart. His *cailleach* will apologise to you for the meagreness of her larder. She will express the sincerest regret that her table cannot boast the delicacies of a city table ; but, be the stranger who he may, on coming to her door he feels intuitively that he is welcome to share with her family even the most frugal repast. As yet, commerce, and the ever-growing school that puts " business " considerations first, have not robbed the native of Barra of the traditional hospitality and simplicity that for hundreds of years have been identified with his fireside.

Appetite of the Stranger Presumed

The reputation for hospitality of the Barra people is proverbial. In olden times a person landing on this Island from one of the more northerly of the Outer Hebrides was obliged to eat and drink immediately after disembarking, even though he might have wine and dined sumptuously

within an hour. The meal partaken of on landing at Barra was termed "ocean meat" (referred to as "Bieyta'v" by Martin), because the natives presumed that the voyage to their Island always gave the stranger a sharp appetite. Of this repast the stranger was expected to partake, whether he felt inclined or not. Another provision in their code of hospitality permitted only one stranger to lodge with a family at the time. By this custom husband and wife, while visiting the Island of Barra, lived in different houses. If a number of friends arrived together, arrangements for the lodging of them were made in this way, without even consulting them. Doubtless the objects of this custom were to give to the maximum number of inhabitants an opportunity of being hospitable, and at the same time to prevent the limited resources of the more generous from being taxed unduly.

"Addicted to the Use of Whisky"

It may be said of the inhabitants of Barra that they are simple, kindly, and unaffected. Moreover, on the whole they are temperate, though drunkenness is not unknown among them. So far as my powers of observation would justify my expressing any opinion, I contend that the only serious blot on the whole Island of Barra is the existence of a license at Castlebay for the sale of intoxicating liquor. But for its continuance, ungainly scenes would be exceedingly rare. With its removal Barra would become an exemplary island in most respects.

The prominence of whisky in the Hebrides early attracted the attention both of the Privy Council and of the historian and annotator. Among others, MacCulloch com-

ments on this point in relation to Barra, as does also the *New Statistical Account*, which is loud in condemnation of the "dram-house." "It is a drawback to the merits of the Barra men," writes MacCulloch, "that they are addicted to the use of whisky; a propensity fostered by their great gains as much as by their mode of life."

The Privy Council and the Importation of Wines

In an attempt to check the insobriety of the Hebridean people, an Act was passed in 1609 prohibiting the importation to the Isles of wines and spirits from the mainland. Seven years later (1616) the Privy Council went a step further by forbidding the free use of wines in the Western Isles, under heavy penalty. At a convocation held in Edinburgh in that year, to which a number of the Highland and Island chieftains were summoned, "the great and extraordinary excesse in drinking of wyne, commonlie usit among the commonis and tenantis of the Yllis" constituted one of the main topics on the agenda. In 1622 the Council of Scotland passed the *Act that Nane send Wynis to the Ilis*, being concerned that, despite earlier attempts to limit the consumption of alcoholic beverages, the Hebrideans "ar so fer possest that quhen thair arryvis ony ship or other veshell thair with wyne thay spend bothe dayis and nightis in thair excesse of drinking and seldome do thay leave thair drinking so lang as thair is ony of the wyne restand sua that being overcome with drink thair fallis oute mony inconvenientis amangis thame to the brek of his maiesteis peace; and, quhairas the chieftanes and principallis of the clannis in the Ilis ar actit to tak suche ordour with thair tennentis as nane of thame be sufferit to drink wyne, yitt

so lang as thair is ony wyne caryed to the Ilis thay will hardlie be withdrawne frome thair evill custome of drinking, bot will follow the same and continew the same whensoever they may find the occasioun. . . .”

Wine and Harping

On a rocky islet within a stone's-cast of the clachan of Castlebay are the picturesque ruins of Kisimul Castle, the ancient fortress of the MacNeils, who for centuries were Chiefs of Barra. In Kisimul Castle are enshrined all the history and legend, poetry and song of this enchanting Isle.

During the sixteenth century and the early years of the seventeenth, the MacNeils of Barra gained notoriety by their piratical activities in Hebridean and Irish waters. To a large extent they subsisted on their relentless rievings at sea; and not infrequently would they be regaling their guests with the wines and luxuries they had seized on foreign vessels. Outwith the walls of Kisimul Castle redder wine was never drunk, nor sweeter harping heard, even in Tara of the Kings. Now its corridors are as tuneless as a fiddle without strings.

Och nan och! to-day the MacNeils are far furth from Kisimul and Blue Barra of the Waves, their fathers' inheritance for years immemorial.



KISIMUL CASTLE, THE ANCIENT STRONGHOLD OF THE MACNEILS OF BARRA, SITUATED IN THE LAND-LOCKED HARBOUR OF CASTLE BAY—THE MOST PICTURESQUE RUIN IN ALL SCOTLAND.

II

KISIMUL CASTLE

A HEBRIDEAN SEA-EYRIE

PERCHED upon a crag, and begirt by the swinging tides that make perpetual crooning around its roofless corridors and eyeless windows, are the ruins of Kisimul Castle, the ancient sea-eyrie that pertained to the MacNeils when Barra constituted the nucleus of their thalassocracy.

To my way of thinking, Kisimul Castle is the sweetest and most poetic structure of its kind in all Scotland. Throughout the entire Hebrides there is nothing that even remotely compares with it, although one can conjecture that upon a time Siol Torquil's stronghold in the Lewis might have rivalled it both as regards strength and uniqueness of situation. To-day not a trace is to be seen of the old Castle that for hundreds of years belonged to the luckless MacLeods of Lewis.

As to the origin of the word, Kisimul, etymologists are somewhat in doubt. The termination, *mul*, however, is by no means an uncommon one in the region of the Barra Isles, and would appear to denote something associated with a rocky sgeir or islet. For instance, between the Uidh of Vatersay and the Island of Muldoanich, and distant only a couple of miles from Kisimul, is a rocky islet called Snuasimul. A somewhat similar sgeir near the south-eastern entrance to Vatersay Bay goes by the name

of Masamul. Between the Isles of Sandray and Flodday there occurs a rock known as Sgeir Noddimul ; while an island situated midway between Sandray and Pabbay, and considerably larger than any of the aforementioned, is called Greanamul.

“ Upon a Strenthey Craige ”

At a big ebb, the crag on which Kisimul Castle is erected becomes visible on all sides, and illustrates how closely the walls of this structure conform to the configuration of its rock foundation—a circumstance that, as in the case of Mingary, makes it assume a polygonal character. At high water, however, the crag is so submerged as to allow most of the walls of Kisimul Castle to rise vertically out of the sea to an altitude of about sixty feet. The only point over which the sea does not break even at high tide (except during storms, which are not infrequent in these parts !) is on the south-west side.

Legion are the references to this Hebridean stronghold and to the bay in which it stands. Writing of Castle Bay, George Buchanan informs us that “ this bay hath ane island in it, and therein a strong fort or castle.” Dean Monro tells us that at one end of the Isle of Barra “ ther enters a salt-water loche, verey narrow in the entrey, and round and braide within. Into the middis of the saide loche ther is ane ile, upon a strenthey craige, callit Kilcherin, pertaining to the MackNeill of Barray.”

A sixteenth-century document relating to the Western Isles refers to the Chief of Barra, and records that “ his principall dwelling-place thair is callit Keissadull, quhilk is ane excellent strenth, for it standis on the seaside under

ane great craig, sua that the craig cummis over it, and na passage to the place but be the sea, quhairof the entrie is narrow, but that ane scheip may pass throw, and within that entres is ane round heavin and defence for schippis from all tempestis. This Ile is five miles of lenth or thairby, and is 20 lb. land, and may raise on this Ile, with foure or five small Iles that he hes beside it, 200 gude men."

Each of the three authorities just quoted concludes his account of Barra and Kisimul Castle with an allusion to the renowned cockle-beds of the Tràigh Mhór, or Great Shore of Barra.

Kisimul's Well

In point of time, the next reliable source of information regarding Kisimul is Martin Martin's *Description of the Western Isles of Scotland* (circa 1695). Martin writes: "The little island Kismul lies about a quarter of a mile from the south of this isle (*i.e.*, from the mainland of the Isle of Barra). It is the seat of Macneil of Barray; there is a stone wall round it two stories high, reaching the sea, and within the wall there is an old tower and a hall, with other houses about it. There is a little magazine in the tower, to which no stranger hath access." He then goes on to tell us something of the officer called the cockman, who refused him admittance to the Castle. To Martin's reception by this official we shall return directly.

In the early years of the nineteenth century John MacCulloch, M.D., visited Barra. He mentions that, on arriving at the shores of Castlebay, within earshot of Kisimul Castle, he descried a village ornamented with dried skate, and having "a most ancient and fish-like

smell." MacCulloch expressed surprise at finding within the precincts of Kisimul Castle a well " which, arising in the middle of the sea, is an object of much wonder to the natives. It is secured with masonry, and arched." This well is also alluded to in the *New Statistical Account* ; but the compiler of the latter record was unable to ascertain whether it was used as a reservoir for rain-water, or sunk with the object of raising water from beneath. The locus of the well is still plainly discernible, albeit many years ago it was almost completely filled up with stones which the natives cast into it, in order to prevent the unwary from tumbling into it.

" *Butter, Chese, and Bysket* "

Taking into consideration the sumptuous scale on which the MacNeils of Barra entertained, to a castle like Kisimul the importance of a thoroughly reliable well could not be over-emphasised. There is little reason to suppose that in the zenith of their power the MacNeils drank much water when we know that, as a result of their predacious habits at sea, successive chiefs usually were enabled to keep their wine-cellars well stocked. But at least we may credit the MacNeils with having indulged occasionally in personal ablutions with fresh water ; and there is not the slightest doubt that, in the cooking of food at Kisimul, well water was used in great quantities—and more especially in the preparation of salted foods, which comprised the major portion of their diet in winter-time.

The lack of a plentiful and reliable supply of fresh water within its own walls threatened the defensive possibilities of many a castle in time of siege. An inadequate

reserve from an internal source almost invariably confronted the occupiers of fortresses built upon rock foundations, except where drilling revealed the presence of a spring. When in 1548 the Castle of Broughty (Burgh-Tay) was garrisoned by the English, the commandant, eager to conserve its somewhat limited supplies of water, requisitioned for the rationing of his troops "as muche butter, chese, and bysket, as maye be ; for those vitayles requyre no water to the kete."

Dunscaith appears to have had a well sunk in the rock on which it was built ; and at Tantallon a shaft was lowered to the depth of a hundred feet through basalt. The well at Kisimul is sunk in a rock harder to drill than basalt.

Kisimul's Staircases

Off the side of the large window on the second floor of Kisimul commences a straight stair which, ascending in the thickness of the wall, turns a corner to reach the battlements. The basement also was reached by a straight staircase ; whereas an external stone stair, now in a state of almost complete dilapidation, led up to within a few feet of the first landing.

In his *Mediæval Castle in Scotland* W. MacKay MacKenzie attributes the absence of spiral stairs in such island strongholds as Kisimul to the inadaptability of local building material to the fashioning of the newel.

Deceived by a Cow's Hide

The actual dimensions of Kisimul Castle need scarcely be enumerated here. Those who may be interested in its

architectural details could not do better than consult MacGibbon and Ross's *Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland* (Vol. III.).

It is believed that Kisimul shared with Brochel Castle, in the Isle of Raasay, the enviable distinction of being able to accommodate all the inhabitants of the island to which it belonged. Tradition urges that more than once was the capacity of Kisimul Castle put to the test in this respect. On a notable occasion a neighbouring clan (or was it the rieving Lochlannaich, as some aver?) came to Barra and laid siege to Kisimul Castle, wherein all the islanders had sought timely refuge. Imagining that the emergency rations of its defenders consisted solely of one dun cow, which was kept in the courtyard of the Castle, the besiegers fancied that imminent starvation would force a capitulation at any moment. Days of suspense and anxious waiting followed upon one another, till eventually the besieged slung the hide of a white cow over the crenellated parapet, that it might dry in the sun. Great, to be sure, was the chagrin of the besiegers when on the morrow they discovered that the place of the white hide was occupied by a black one. Thinking that the occupants of the Castle must have had a great herd of cattle at their disposal, and being aware that Kisimul contained a well with a limitless supply of fresh water, they at last decided to raise the siege and to return to their respective homes.

But the fact of the matter was that the besieged possessed only *one* hide. This hide they dyed a different colour each day, so as to make believe that, on the contrary, their commissariat was far from being exhausted.

A Lofty Tower

The great strength of Kisimul lay in its being accessible only by water—an advantage much appreciated by the MacNeils of Barra, who were accounted the most skilful seamen of their day, and are accredited with having had a boat of their own in Noah's time.

Exactly when the MacNeils built Kisimul Castle is uncertain. No doubt, a less pretentious fortress occupied the site prior to the construction of the castle whose ruins to-day are so picturesque and eloquent. More than two hundred years ago the people of Barra declared that Kisimul was five hundred years old ; and Martin was informed at the time of his visit that Kisimul was occupied by the thirty-fourth lineal chieftain—" if the present genealogers can be credited," he adds.

In the course of his Rhind Lectures in archæology (1925-26), W. MacKay MacKenzie expressed the view that, though no castle could look more primitive than Kisimul, there exists no evidence to prove that one stone was laid upon another before 1427—the year in which Alexander, Lord of the Isles, made over Barra to Gilleonan MacNeil by charter. But, although I, personally, can produce no archæological qualifications whatsoever, surely you will allow me to venture the suggestion that, since the MacNeils must have been preceded in Barra, their predecessors, in all probability, required some kind of stronghold. The evidences of a Norse occupation put forward in the first few pages of this volume at least entitle us to premise that these piratical settlers built stone fortifications of some sort. That they built of wood seems almost

inconceivable, having regard to the distances which it would have been necessary to transport that commodity for building purposes in the Western Isles. To assert that between the remote era of brochs and duns and the early fifteenth century an island like Barra could not boast a single place of refuge and defence, constructed of stone, would be extravagant. If the Norsemen built of stone, some remains of their structures must exist, difficult to locate as archæologists may find such remains.

For centuries the Norsemen traversed the greater part of Europe, ravaging wheresoever they went. In France they were familiar with the amphitheatres at Nîmes and Arles : in Italy they came into contact with the architectural splendours of Rome : in Constantinople they found the highest expression of yet another school of art. And even in Britain itself they were afforded an opportunity of studying Roman methods of building.

The art displayed on their brooches proves conclusively that among their numbers there were artists ; and it seems reasonable to conjecture that, if their art assumed one form, it very probably assumed other forms. And, therefore, why should we not concede that it may have taken the form of fortresses built of stone ?

In the south-east angle of Kisimul Castle stands a lofty square tower, the original entrance to which faces the courtyard already mentioned. This tower is deeply crenelated, as is the wall. It is carried up from a broadly splayed base to an altitude of roughly sixty feet. So far as I have been able to ascertain, history does not furnish the date at which the tower was built. Towers were frequently added to Highland and Island fortresses of the period to which Kisimul belongs. Duart illustrates another typical example



THE PIER AT CASTLEBAY, WITH THE ISLANDS OF OROSAY, VATERSAY, SANDRAY, AND MINGULAY IN THE
BACKGROUND.

of a stronghold to which was added a tower after the style of the old Scottish baronial keep.

The tower was certainly in existence at the time of Martin's coming to Barra, for he refers to it as having contained a magazine into which no stranger was admitted. This magazine may have been nothing more or less than the apartment in which the viands and wines were stored.

In more recent times a number of minor buildings—now mostly in ruins—were constructed for residential purposes within the enceinte of Kisimul Castle.

The Sentinel at Kisimul Castle

Martin's account is largely concerned with relating how the officer, known as the cockman, declined to facilitate his seeing Kisimul Castle. He learnt some weeks afterwards that the cockman's refusal was due to the facts that at the time of his visit MacNeil and his lady were away from home, and that this sentinel suspected the intending visitor might have been a spy sent forth by a foreign power with the object of securing secret information about this fort.

Martin makes no fewer than three references to the cockman. He tells us that at the top of such castles as Kisimul there was constantly a sentinel "called 'gockmin,' or in the English tongue cockman," whose duty it was to challenge the approach of any stranger or suspected person. The part of his account dealing with the altercation that ensued between him and the cockman is of sufficient interest to warrant its being quoted here :

"I saw the officer called the Cockman, and an old cock he is ; when I bid him ferry me over the water to the island, he told me that he was but an inferior officer, his business being to

attend in the tower ; but if (says he) the constable, who then stood on the wall, will give you access, I'll ferry you over. I desired him to procure me the constable's permission, and I would reward him ; but having waited some hours for the constable's answer, and not receiving any, I was obliged to return without seeing this famous fort."

One cannot help regretting that Martin failed to gain admittance to Kisimul Castle, for the description he would have given of its interior arrangements would have been a valuable one to-day. And we may well conjecture that this regret has been shared by not a few of the subsequent chiefs of the MacNeils of Barra. Martin's observations on the Western Isles have been relied upon by many a wanderer among them, and by many a stay-at-home. Even the burly Dr. Johnson, despite all his self-assurance and his Scotophobic pretences, benefited by his perusal of them, when in 1773 he and his aide-de-camp toured the more accessible Isles. The copy of Martin's *Description of the Western Isles of Scotland*, used by Dr. Johnson on the occasion of his journey through them, is now preserved in the National Library of Scotland, and bears an autographed inscription by Boswell.

The Cockman's Status

That the cockman was an inferior official, under the direction of the constable, is proved by Martin's alluding in another place to the payments due to "those of the lower posts, such as the cockman and porter . . . each of whom hath his respective due, which is punctually paid." In his etymological Gaelic Dictionary, Malcolm MacLennan, D.D., gives the words, *gocaman* and *gocuman* as meaning a domestic sentinel, an attendant, or one on the

outlook in the crow's-nest of a ship. Jamieson gives "cockman" and its variants as connoting a sentinel.

It was the particular duty of the cockman to keep watch day and night, and to challenge the approach of a stranger with—"Who comes there?" In Barra the perquisites due to his position were paid to him duly at two terms in the year.

The Constable at Castle Sweyn

Many castles in Scotland boasted a constable; and, doubtless, in several of them a cockman or watchman was employed. The MacKenzies of Kintail retained at Eilean Donan a constable who, we may surmise, enjoyed a status not inferior to that of the constable whom Martin found at Kisimul. So far as I am aware, no account of Eilean Donan contains a reference actually to the retention there of a cockman; but we learn from the Clan Donald records that, when in 1539 Eilean Donan sustained an attack by the MacDonalds under the leadership of Donald Gorm (who at the time was a claimant to the Lordship of the Isles), a "watchman" was numbered among the three men who were in occupation of the Castle.

Apropos the office of cockman, it may not be inappropriate to recall here that, in the days of the Lords of the Isles, a MacNeil occupied this position at Castle Sweyn, in Knapdale. His name was Hector Mac Torquil MacNeil. He belonged not to the Barra branch of the family, however, but to the Gigha branch. The earliest possessors of Knapdale and North Kintyre, of whom we have any cognisance, were the Sweyns (or Sweens), who gave their name to Castle Sweyn, and appear to have been located there as late as the thirteenth century.

At a subsequent date Knapdale passed into the ownership of the MacNeils of Gigha. It was in 1427 that Alexander, Lord of the Isles, granted a charter to one Gilleonan MacNeil, conveying to him the Island of Barra, together with the lands of Boisdale, in South Uist. How long Hector Mac Torquil MacNeil remained constable at Castle Sweyn I am unable to say.

Kisimul's Men-at-arms

Besides the constable and cockman, Kisimul Castle had its men-at-arms; and men of might and valour were they! This bodyguard is called "luchktaeh" by Martin (probably a corruption of *luchd-tighe*). Its duty consisted in being constantly in attendance on the chieftain, both at home and abroad—though the name would seem to indicate that its main function was that of garrisoning the Castle. The young men composing MacNeil's *garde du corps* were trained in swordsmanship, wrestling, swimming, dancing, jumping, and archery. And, furthermore, they were proficient seamen, and could man a galley at a moment's notice.

MacNeil's Armour-bearer

MacNeil of Barra also retained in Kisimul the services of a resolute armour-bearer, who waited upon him personally. To this member of the household staff was assigned a double portion of meat at every meal, he being shown, in matters dietetic, especial consideration in virtue of his extraordinary size and prowess.

Of course Kisimul Castle was not without its piper, its harper, its fool, its marshal, and its bard or bardess. In a



CASTLEBAY AS SEEN FROM THE SLOPES OF HEAVAL, WITH THE VILLAGE OF VATERSAY
ON THE RIGHT, AND PART OF THE ISLAND OF MULDOANICH ON THE LEFT.



GUTTERS AT WORK ON MACKENZIE'S CURING STATION, CASTLEBAY.

subsequent chapter I shall be telling you something of a famous bardess in the employ of the MacNeils of Barra.

Where Captives were Confined

In Barra, local legend has it that MacNeil confined his prisoners in the bottle-dungeon at the base of the tower of Kisimul Castle, having had them lowered into it by means of a strong rope expressly reserved for the purpose. To-day the only feasible ingress to the tower is attained by scrambling up the face of a somewhat dilapidated wall, and then through what appears to have been a window on the first landing. The ordeal is one which only the most nimble adult would be safe in risking. Only a small, barefooted boy can perform this feat with any real element of safety. The Castlebay boys are continually rowing over to Kisimul, and climbing up to the old ramparts ; and in places one may discover the tiny recesses in the walls, into which they place their toes when scaling its battlements. From personal experience I can vouch that the ascent to the tower, even under such limited circumstances, is infinitely less perilous than the descent to the courtyard below. To enter this tower without the assistance of a ladder is an achievement entailing no small risk, and demanding no uncertain degree of self-confidence.

MacNeil and his Trumpeter

From the top of the tower one is given some conception of how imposing a structure Kisimul Castle must have been when the dauntless MacNeils of Barra occupied it,

and held high carnival on the strength of their repeated rievings at sea. Little wonder the cockman felt the importance of his position when he declined to admit Martin to the Castle in the absence of his Chief! And one can well imagine, too, the pleasure MacNeil of Barra must have derived from sending a magniloquent herald up to the top of the tower to announce in the Gaelic to his clansfolk assembled by the shore at Castlebay that their chief had wine and dined in real style! In his *Voyage Round the Coasts of Scotland* (1842) Wilson tells us that MacNeil's trumpeter used to deliver himself from the top of the tower in the following terms:

“Hear, O ye people! and listen, O ye nations! The great M'Neil of Barra, having finished his meal, the princes of the earth may dine.”

Assailed with Stones

Both history and tradition assert that from the battlements of Kisimul Castle, and through “a perforated stone,” the cockman was wont to drop large stones on the head of any one attempting to surprise the garrison. I was told in Castlebay that such stones were attached to ropes, in order that, after having performed their task, they might be drawn up to the parapet and used again when occasion arose.

The manner in which unwelcome visitors to Kisimul were assailed with stones is attested by a reference contained in a description of some legal proceedings at Edinburgh. The original document is in the muniment room at Dunvegan; and the following extract from it illustrates how Ruairi MacNeil of Barra received an un-

fortunate notary, who was sent to serve a writ on him in the year 1690 :

“ The said Rory MacNeil threw large stones from the roof of his house, whereby the said notary was in danger of being battered, and discharged four scoir shots from guns, pistols, muskets, hagbutts, and other invadive and forbidden weapons, whereby he was put in hazard of his life, and took from him all the papers he had in his company, and, in high and proud contempt of His Majesty’s authority, did ofend and grieve the same.”

Precautions against Surprise Attacks

Commenting upon the cockman at Kisimul Castle, the *New Statistical Account* informs us that, while on duty during the night-time, this sentinel was in the habit of repeating rhymes to himself, so as to prevent his falling asleep. And by way of adding a little variety to his vigil, and at the same time of minimising the danger of the fortress’s being surprised by an enemy, he used to employ his spare moments in throwing stones over the outside of the entrance to the Castle. These stones were let down through a hole made for this purpose in the wall, immediately above the entrance.

The ensuing paragraph, occurring under “ MacNeil ” in *The Scottish Nation* (Anderson), alludes not only to the cockman, but also to his stone-throwing propensities :

“ Kisimul Castle is a building of an hexagonal form, strongly built, with a wall above thirty feet high, and anchorage for small vessels on every side of it. In one of its angles is a high square tower, on the top of which, at the corner immediately above the gate, is a hole, through which the gockman, or watchman, who sat there all night, threw down stones upon any one who might attempt to surprise the gate in the darkness.”

A Creek for Kisimul's Galley

A narrow creek in the rock opposite the south wall of Kisimul Castle, and sheltered from the waves by a sea-wall acting as a miniature breakwater, is still pointed out as the quay alongside which Kisimul's Galley was berthed when it returned to Barra from its rieving exploits in Hebridean and Irish waters. This place of security for boats is spoken of by Dr. MacCulloch. On the rocky shore below Duntulm, in Trotternish, may yet be seen the natural slipway up which the Lords of the Isles drew their birlinns. The straight groove worn in the rock by the keels of Clan Ranald's galleys is still plainly discernible ; and to this day the fishermen living in the neighbourhood of Duntulm are accustomed to beach their craft at this *Barr nam Biorlainn*.

Many a stout " ochdramhach " or eight-oared galley did the MacNeils build in Barra ; and there came a namely man out of Skye when Donald Gorm visited Kisimul on the express invitation of the Chief of Barra, who sought his expert advice in the construction of a new birlinn. In his day Donald Gorm was regarded as the best judge of a galley in all the Hebrides.

Queen Elizabeth and the Chief of Barra

One might engage your attention for long enough with tales of Kisimul, and of the MacNeils of Barra—those desperate pirates who were continually sweeping the Hebrid seas in search of plunder, and even took toll of the Irish. But there dawned an evil day on Barra when, following

upon a complaint made to the Court of Scotland by Queen Elizabeth, King James VI. entrusted Ruairi MacKenzie, the indefatigable Tutor of Kintail, with the capture of Ruairi, Chief of the MacNeils of Barra. Swift and crafty was MacKenzie in the carrying out of the Privy Council's instructions, for he was not long in enticing Ruairi MacNeil to board a vessel that, under pretence of friendship, had dropped anchor in the shadow of Kisimul Castle.

And the cockle-gatherers and the whelk-gatherers of Barra, when there was knowledge at them as to what had befallen poor Ruairi MacNeil, assembled by the shore fornenst Kisimul Castle ; and they wept and they wailed because their intrepid Chief had been stolen from them by a piece of mean trickery.

Of Ruairi MacNeil and his wily captor I may be telling you more at another time.

III

ISLAND PIRATES

THE MACNEILS AND THEIR CLAN RANALD RIVALS

THE closing years of the sixteenth century, and the first few decades of the seventeenth, may be described as the golden era of Hebridean piracy. This was an age during which the maritime chieftains of the Western Highlands and Islands, having tested the efficiency of a new means of adding to their incomes, and enjoyed the handsome revenues derived therefrom, eagerly strove to outmatch one another in the performance of acts of treason and derring-do on the high seas.

In the race for maritime supremacy in the Hebrides, the MacNeils of Barra seldom lagged far behind. Indeed, it was held that the rieving birlinns belonging to the Chief of Barra constituted a greater menace to peaceful trading vessels passing through Hebrid seas than did all the other piratical crews infesting the creeks and inlets of the West Highlands. From early times the MacNeils of Barra maintained an enviable reputation for seamanship: they were deemed the most skilful seafarers of their day. And it was only natural that, during these years of lawlessness on land and sea, they should turn their special knowledge and skill to lucrative account. Persistent as were the acts of piracy committed by them, it must be conceded, nevertheless, that, in the pursuit of their sea-rieving avocation,

the MacNeils of Barra usually conducted their maritime adventures with a certain sense of chivalry toward their unfortunate victims. And, furthermore, it would be unfair to allege that the conduct of the Hebridean pirates was an iota worse than that of the keepers of kings' consciences, who, having summoned certain members of the Highland aristocracy to Edinburgh and elsewhere, and on ostensibly friendly pretexts, repeatedly imprisoned them, and even went to the excess of putting them to death when they could not find adequate caution to justify their being liberated.

Roderic the Turbulent

Notorious among the pirates of the Hebrides, during the period with which we are concerned, was *Ruairi 'n Tartair*, or Roderic the Turbulent, who, I believe, was the XXXVth Chief of the MacNeils of Barra. Ruairi was a veritable Bretwalda among the princes of the West Highlands and Hebrides.

Now, had he confined his sea-rieving efforts solely to intercepting French and Spanish vessels, all might have gone well with him for long enough ; but, not content with what he derived from spulzying foreign ships, he carried his predatory campaign into Irish waters, where many an English vessel fell a prey to the plundering propensities of the men who manned his galleys. It is held that, from floor to ceiling, Ruairi's wine-cellars in Kisimul were stored with the richest wines of France and Iberia, and that

In his stables were three pairs
Of black steeds with golden shoes
Made from Oriental wares,
Captured on some rieving cruise.

So greatly to be feared at this time were the pirates of Barra that no skipper familiar with their tactics dared sail his ship within many leagues of Castlebay, if he could avoid doing so.

Queen Elizabeth's Complaint

The repeated acts of robbery and piracy committed in Irish waters by the Barra rievors on the ships belonging to the subjects of the Queen of England led eventually to the termination of Ruairi MacNeil's piratical sovereignty in the Western Isles. Queen Elizabeth, unable to tolerate his infamous conduct any longer, was constrained to address a communication to King James VI. of Scotland, complaining of the acts of hostility perpetrated on her subjects by Ruairi MacNeil, Chief of Barra, and appealing to His Majesty to devise some scheme whereby Ruairi and his sea-rieving entourage might be brought to justice. Desirous of maintaining Elizabeth's friendship and respect at all costs, King James forthwith communicated the nature of her complaint to Ruairi MacNeil. Howbeit, repeated warnings had so little effect on the arbitrary conduct of the Barra pirates that before long the King was casting about him for some one whose prowess and ingenuity might reduce Ruairi MacNeil to a state of subjugation and impotence.

A Man fertile in Plots

Well did the King know that, if driven to the last resort, there was a certain man who, adjudged by the meritorious manner in which he had acquitted himself in somewhat similar circumstances, would succeed in bringing

the Chief of Barra to his knees. And that man was Ruairi MacKenzie, the resolute and redoubtable Tutor of Kintail. Wherefore, on the King's recommendation, MacKenzie undertook a task involving a great deal of forethought and no small element of danger.

Without delay MacKenzie, whose brain at all times was fertile in plots, set himself a-thinking how best he could ensnare the elusive Chief of Barra.

A Barque anchors off Kisimul

Providing himself with a small barque manned by a few well-armed partisans, and with an ample supply of wine and cognate delicacies aboard, MacKenzie set sail for the Isle of Barra, and dropped anchor off Castlebay under pretence of friendship. Kindly inquiries for the Chief of Barra had the desired effect when the cockman on sentry-go at the hour of the barque's arrival off Kisimul Castle was directed to conduct its skipper into the presence of Ruairi MacNeil, who felt flattered that the skipper of an unknown vessel calling at Castlebay should exhibit so amicable a disposition toward him.

Ruairi MacKenzie accepted MacNeil's invitation. According to at least one authority, having ordered the crew of the barque to lie in concealment under the hatchways, the former appeared in the guise of the skipper. As such, at any rate, was he received by Ruairi MacNeil, who, from all accounts, treated his guest hospitably.

Having showered upon his host all manner of compliments, and deceived him into believing that he had come from Norway and was bound for Ireland, MacKenzie of Kintail proceeded to tell a long tale of how, during his

voyage southward, he had fallen in with a French ship, from which he purchased wines as good as ever came from the vintages of France. And it's poor Roderic MacNeil that was believing every word !

An Invitation to Wine

To his plausible request that MacNeil should do him the honour of inspecting his barque, and of tasting some of the choice wines she carried, the unsuspecting Chief of Barra was not slow to comply : seldom was Ruairi MacNeil far to seek when the flowing bowl was to the fore. And so, deeming the opportunity of wining at the expense of a passing stranger one not to be scoffed at, Ruairi was enticed aboard MacKenzie's barque. He was accompanied only by his ordinary bodyguard, " for there only appeared on board of the ship two or three mariners, and some ship boys, being what was only necessary to sail the ship."

Ruairi MacNeil under Hatches

MacKenzie entertained his guest in the cabin of his barque, where, sure enough, the wines of France were much in evidence. And, after Ruairi MacNeil had allowed himself to be regaled too heartily, on a given signal the hatches suddenly were closed down, and armed men rushed in upon him. " Where's my *sgian-dubh* ? Treacherous and vile are ye ! " cried Ruairi, on realising that he had entrusted his life and his birthright to a traitor and a trickster.

Ere the elapse of many minutes, the ship weighed anchor and, with its prisoner under hatches, set sail for Glasgow, wherefrom Ruairi was escorted post-haste to Edinburgh.

And, as I told you in the preceding chapter, the cockle-gatherers and the whelk-gatherers of Barra, fearing lest never again would they be seeing Roderic the Turbulent in the flesh, forgathered by the seashore opposite Kisimul Castle, where they wailed long and wept woefully, because the knavery of MacKenzie of Kintail had robbed them of their daring Chief.

Not a Word of English

Agreeably surprised were King James and his Court at Edinburgh on finding before them not a mean, despicable fellow, but a tall, long-bearded, stately chieftain, well-favoured, and challenging a certain degree of consideration and respect.

Now, there being not a word of English at Ruairi, Chief of Barra, King James commanded that Rory MacKenzie should inquire of him in the Gaelic what had moved him to perpetrate so many "pyracies and robbrys" on the law-abiding subjects of Queen Elizabeth. MacNeil answered in effect that the harassing of English ships was the only way whereby he could vindicate his animosity toward the woman who, in cold blood, had been instrumental in sending to her fate at Fotheringay Mary, Queen of Scots, the King's mother.

Dumbfounded was King James when Rory MacKenzie of Kintail interpreted MacNeil's reply; and he rose up and exclaimed:

"The devil take the carle! Rory, take him with you again, and dispose of him and his fortune as you please."¹

¹ Fraser's *Earls of Cromartie*.

“ *Sex or Sevin Score of Yeares* ”

This Rory MacKenzie did. He allowed Ruairi MacNeil to return to Kisimul Castle ; but thereafter the Chief of Barra held his estates from MacKenzie as his superior, and for an annual payment of forty pounds. Forby, Roderic the Turbulent bound and obliged himself to furnish a hawk when required, and to render physical assistance to MacKenzie of Kintail should any extraordinary occasion arise.

Whether the Chief of Barra ever was called upon to implement these obligations we know not : nor have we any means of ascertaining. The probability is that, on setting foot on Barra again, he conveniently forgot that he had given any undertaking whatsoever.

Despite the rebellious character of his career in and around Barra, and his trials and adventures furth of it, Ruairi MacNeil appears to have enjoyed considerable longevity. If we accept the accuracy of a contemporary account, he himself declared at one time that he was “ sex or sevin score of yeares.”¹

Rory MacKenzie and the Berisay Pirates

The capture of Roderic the Turbulent was considered a laudable achievement on MacKenzie's part. But this was not the only occasion on which he and his kinsmen employed similar stratagem to advantage, nor in which wine played an active part in the betrayal of Hebridean predators and malefactors. On the demise of Torquil

¹ MacFarlane's *Geographical Collections*, Vol. II., pp. 178-9.

Dubh MacLeod of Lewis, MacKenzie of Gairloch "pursued the Clan-wick-Gil-cholm with fyre and sword . . . making them participant of the calamities of the Seill Torquill."¹

And then over the MacLeods of Raasay the MacKenzies gained an appreciable success when, in 1611, at the conclusion of an uproar on a vessel chartered by the Laird of Gairloch, and detained possibly by contrary winds in the Sound of Raasay, MacLeod of Raasay, who unwittingly had stepped aboard the vessel with the express intention of purchasing some wine, was done to death in a fierce struggle with his opponents.²

The same Rory MacKenzie contrived a scheme whereby, at the instigation of the Privy Council, he was successful in dislodging Neil MacLeod and his pirate adherents from the rocky islet of Berisay, in Loch Roag,³ thus ultimately quelling Siol Torquil's rebellion in the Lewis.

A Mull Pirate's Threat

Although the MacNeils were a thorn in the flesh of many a peaceful trader, their consciences did not smite them when they were invited to sit in judgment on some poor unfortunate sea-riever who had fallen into the clutches of the law ; and, in his book on the Clan MacNeil, Robert Lister MacNeil, the present and XLVth Chief, recites the story of how a Mull pirate swore vengeance on MacNeil of Barra, who happened to be one of the judges trying his case. No sooner had the verdict of " guilty " been brought

¹ Sir Robert Gordon's *Earldom of Sutherland*.

² *Over the Sea to Skye*, p. 224.

³ *Behold the Hebrides !* pp. 105-9.

in against the Mull riever than he rose to his feet and, shaking his clenched fist at MacNeil, exclaimed: "Barra is far off; but it can be reached!" (*Ged is fada mach Barraidh, ruigear e*, says the Gaelic proverb.)

"All Kynd of Barbaritie"

The piratical pranks of the MacNeils of Barra and their dauntless myrmidons constantly were occupying the attention of the Privy Council. In January of 1610 the King's advisers showed real concern that, though frequently charged to render his obedience to King and Council, Rory MacNeil of Barra still continued to absent himself by remaining in the Isle of Barra, committing "all kynd of barbaritie" on the poor inhabitants of the adjacent Isles, thus militating against the reduction of the Hebrides to parliamentary control. And so, deeming it "a mater tuitching us [His Majesty] verie neir in our honnour that suche a unworthie cative sould be sufferit without controlment so long to continew rebellious or to braith the air of our cuntry," certain barons, including Hector MacLean of Duart, were commissioned to convocate the lieges in arms with a view to apprehending Rory MacNeil and those of his kinsmen who were supporting him in his attitude of defiance, and to enter them before the Council to answer for their rebellious conduct.

A month later the Privy Council, understanding that the Captain of Clan Ranald had lately apprehended John Og MacNeil, son of the Chief of Barra, and brought him captive to Glasgow, pronounced it unfair that the said Captain should be burdened with the further transport of his prisoner. Under pain of rebellion, therefore, they

charged the provost and bailies of Glasgow to take the rebel from Clan Ranald, and to transfer him within forty-eight hours to the magistrates of Linlithgow, who within forty-eight hours of their receiving MacNeil were charged to hand him over to the provost and bailies of Edinburgh, by whose orders he was confined in the Tolbooth under pain of rebellion.

A Bordeaux Vessel plundered

It was during these troublous years that there occurred off the coast of Barra an incident that gave rise to considerable complications. A vessel belonging to a Bordeaux merchant named Abel Dynes fell victim to the depredatory proclivities of the pirates of Barra. The actual facts relating to this piracy are somewhat obscure; but in any case we know that the sons of the Chief of Barra were in no small measure accessory to the plundering of this ship, and to the summary disposal of its crew.

In giving evidence in September 1613 on the state of affairs in the Highlands and Islands generally, James Primrose, Clerk to the Privy Council, deponed that "The haill Iles ar in a reasounable goode estate and quietnes, except the Lewis and the Ile of Barra."

A Dynastic Quarrel

The turmoil in Barra had its origin in a feud between the sons of old MacNeil, begotten of two mothers. MacNeil had several sons by the eldest sister of MacLean of Duart, with whom he had contracted a "hand-fast" marriage. His lawful spouse, nevertheless, was the youngest

sister of the Captain of Clan Ranald. The opposing claims of the sons of these two marriages for the prerogative in the succession played havoc with the MacNeil family, as did a somewhat similar dispute among the MacLeods of Lewis about the same time. The struggle ensuing from the rival claims of the sons of old Ruairi MacLeod of the Lewis shattered the power of Siol Torquil in the Long Island, and made possible the conquest of their heritage by the MacKenzies of Kintail.

The eldest son of MacNeil by the sister of MacLean of Duart was called Donald. Now Donald was regarded as one of the principal accomplices in the attack on Abel Dynes's ship, and in the slaughter of its crew. In consequence of the commission granted to Clan Ranald in 1610 to apprehend Donald, the Captain of Clan Ranald encompassed him within the Isle of Barra, and straightway escorted him to the Tolbooth of Edinburgh, "quhair he endit this lyffe"—whether by execution or by a natural death history does not relate.

The Charge against Neil Og

In revenge for this *coup de maître* on the part of Clan Ranald, MacLean of Duart and Donald's brothers-german swore vengeance not only on the Captain of Clan Ranald, but also on Clan Ranald's nephews—the sons by the marriage of Ruairi MacNeil with Clan Ranald's sister. With the assistance of their uncle, MacLean of Duart, Donald's brothers carried off Neil, who was Ruairi's eldest son by Clan Ranald's sister. They speedily dispatched him to the Tolbooth on an unsubstantiated charge not merely of misprision of treason, but of having taken part



THE LANDING-PLACE, ISLE OF BERNERAY (BARRA HEAD).

(Photo by Robert M. Adam.)

in the rieving of Abel Dynes's ship. In the Tolbooth Neil remained a long time.

Yet, although Dynes's agents and procurators pressed hard for a conviction, the charge against Neil was abandoned and he was assoilzied. Through the influence of the Captain of Clan Ranald he was demitted on bail, the former having gone surety for him to the extent of "Xm merkis." Eventually the Lords of Secret Session issued a warrant for the delivery from the ward of the provost and bailies of Edinburgh of Neil MacNeil to his uncle, the Captain of Clan Ranald.

Clan Ranald becomes Cautioner

As a sequel to Neil's release, the Privy Council had before it in 1612 a complaint by one Wm. Wemys, merchant burgess of Glasgow, as procurator for Abel Dynes. The complaint set forth that, whereas Neil Og, son of Rory MacNeil of Barra, having been confined in the Tolbooth of Edinburgh for spulzying a vessel owned by the foresaid Abel, when she was lying at anchor off the Isle of Barra, laden with Spanish wines, and for "slaying and hurting" five of the vessel's crew, had been delivered to his uncle, Donald MacAllan MacIain, Captain of Clan Ranald, on the promise of the latter to enter him when required, nothing had been done in settlement for the said wrong. Wherefore the Captain of Clan Ranald was charged to appear and enter the said Neil before the Privy Council.

Consequent upon his having failed to obey these instructions within a reasonable time, Clan Ranald was denounced as a rebel.

However, in the following year (1613) the Captain of

Clan Ranald compeared personally before the Lords of Secret Council, and presented and exhibited to them Neil MacNeil, son of Ruairi, Chief of Barra. Clan Ranald became cautioner for Neil MacNeil, that he (Neil) would appear in person and be answerable for the decree made against him in respect of any action at the instance of Abel Dynes, the Bordeaux merchant. Clan Ranald also undertook that in no way thereafter would his nephew supply or assist MacLeod of Lewis or any of the Lewis rebels, "under the pane of tua thousand punds."

In the course of time the prosecution of Neil was abandoned, since nothing could be proved against him.

Ruairi MacNeil detained in Irons

All these developments increased the enmity of Donald's brothers, who, thinking their father, Rory MacNeil, more friendly disposed to the sons of the second marriage, and determined to get even with the Captain of Clan Ranald, laid siege to Kisimul Castle along with John MacAllan, piper, and a number of other named accomplices, took the old Chief prisoner, and kept him "fast in the yrnis." A complaint lodged in March 1613 on Rory MacNeil's behalf by Gilleonan Og (one of his sons by the sister of Clan Ranald) resulted in the perpetrators being denounced as rebels. This complaint set forth, *inter alia*, that Neil Og MacNeil and Gilleonan MacNeil, who were described as "sones natural" to Rory, Chief of Barra, came to Kisimul with every conceivable kind of weapon invasive, forced an entry, apprehended the old Chief and Gilleonan Og, his lawful son (who at the time were "within thair awne hous and castell of Kismull in the Yle of Barray,

thair doing thair lauchful effairis in sober and quiet maner" ¹), detained their victims in irons, manned the Castle, amply replenished its larder with victuals and its magazine with arms and ammunition, and generally fortified Kisimul against a possible attack by their brothers-german. I believe that Rory the Turbulent, XXXVth Chief of the MacNeils of Barra, died while Kisimul Castle was still in the unlawful hands of Neil Og and Gilleonan.

Commission granted to Clan Ranald

At the Mercat Cross of Inverness in April of the same year (1613) letters of horning were executed against Neil Og and Gilleonan and certain of their lawless associates. And, "thair being no uther who wald undirtak suche a commissioun," the Captain of Clan Ranald was directed to pursue them.

Clan Ranald executed his mandate with consummate skill: he succeeded not only in putting an end to the internecine quarrel raging between the two factions of the MacNeils, but also in effecting a settlement in favour of the old Chief of Barra and his own nephews. On the demise of Ruairi MacNeil, the succession to the chiefship was secured for the eldest surviving son of the junior family—the family by the sister of Clan Ranald.

In July of 1621 a Crown charter confirmed the grant of Barra and the appurtenant properties to Rory MacKenzie, the Tutor of Kintail. To this estate MacKenzie's son, Sir John MacKenzie of Tarbat, was served heir in 1627. That in 1655 Barra was still in the possession of the Cromartie family is evinced by Sir George MacKenzie's

¹ *Reg. P.C.*

having succeeded his father (the aforementioned Sir John) in that year.

The early years of the eighteenth century found the MacNeil chief of the time holding the Island of Barra from MacDonald of Sleat, the superiority having passed to his family by marriage, I believe.

Clan Ranald's Piracies

It ought to be borne in mind, however, that the MacNeils of Barra were by no means the only Hebridean chieftains who indulged freely in a ruthless system of piracy. The point of differentiation about them is that in the frequency and thoroughness of their rieving exploits they merely excelled their neighbours. Pirate crews from Barra went on plundering expeditions even to Irish waters, where, on numerous occasions, they "took toll of the Irish." The Captains of Clan Ranald, too, were not slow to increase their revenue by seizing an unsuspecting vessel. In the autumn of 1625 there was an "epidemic of piracy" among the MacDonalds of the Isles.

A Leith ship with a cargo of wines, tea, and general merchandise, when rounding Barra Head on a voyage from the Clyde to Danskin, was set upon by the crews that manned the birlinns belonging to John Moidartach, Captain of Clan Ranald. These crews had resorted to the practice, so often indulged in by Ruairi 'n' Tartair, of lying concealed in some obscure creek until a likely victim sailed within convenient distance.

On the occasion just cited, Clan Ranald's men stayed aboard the vessel for several days, partaking lavishly of its sumptuous fare, and drinking freely of its wines. And it

is recorded that, on quitting the argosy, they took with them eight casks of herring, five butts of wine, and three hundred double ells of plaiding.

The Fate of the "Susannah"

Clan Ranald's sea-rieving henchmen perpetrated another successful piracy upon the high seas in 1636, when they took possession of the *Susannah*, an English barque commanded by Richard Seyman of Chichester. "Built in the eclipse, and rigged with curses dark," this vessel was dismasted in a tempest, and driven ashore on the coast of Barra while on a voyage from France to the port of Limerick, laden with goods valued at £100 and consigned to Peter Fox of Limerick. It is said that, having noticed the distress signals of this vessel, the rieving Barramen went out to her, and made salvage arrangements with the captain, in return for a butt of sack and a barrel of raisins. Whereafter they towed the *Susannah* into the harbour at Castlebay, full of high expectations.

John Moidartach takes Possession

Shattered, to be sure, were their plans for the dividing of the spoil when John Moidartach suddenly appeared on the scene with three hundred Clan Ranald desperadoes, and protested that he had a prior claim to the *Susannah*. Clan Ranald forthwith took possession of the vessel and her cargo of wines, fruits, cereals, etc.; and for many a day were Clan Ranald's rieving crews drunk with the wines of France.

Tradition has it that, so as to give his summary conduct

a suggestion of justification, the Captain of Clan Ranald compelled an irresponsible youth on board the *Susannah* to act in the capacity of the ship's agent, and to sign an agreement purporting to sell barque and cargo to him for £8—a sum of money which Clan Ranald promised but never paid.¹

When the Wine was Red

Many a Captain of Clan Ranald was put to the horn for his unwarranted interference with peaceful trading vessels passing through Hebridean waters. For sea-rieving cruises John Moidartach had only one serious rival in the Long Island; and that rival was Ruairi MacNeil who, overpowered with wine to excess, suffered himself to be led into a snare laid for him by his artful adversary, Ruairi MacKenzie, the indefatigable Tutor of Kintail.

“The progress of rivers to the ocean,” says Voltaire, “is not so rapid as that of man to error.” And so was it with Ruairi MacNeil of Barra, *alias* Roderic the Turbulent, who, either in his soberest moments or while looking upon the wine when it was red—as it so often was in Kisimul!—would not be giving a cowrie for the King's authority.

¹ *Clan Donald*, Vol. II., pp. 325-7.

IV

TRADITIONS OF A HEBRIDEAN CLAN

THE CHIEFS OF BARRA AND THEIR IRISH ANCESTRY

Now comes a chapter that the average reader may find both tiresome and monotonous; but there are some to whom a book of this nature would seem incomplete, if it failed to embody some account of the Chiefs of the Barra Isles. However, should the first half-dozen sentences of this chapter bore you, merely pass on to the next.

By no means the least important of the Highland clans that trace their origin to Ireland is the Clan MacNeil. Though the traditional Irish genealogy, as set forth in the succeeding pages, cannot be regarded as strictly accurate if judged in accordance with modern requirements, the MacNeils of Barra show good reason for believing that they are descended from Niall Naoighiallach, Neil of the Nine Hostages, who, on the decease of King Crimthann, became High-King of Ireland in the year A.D. 379, and reigned in Tara until 405.

Neil of the Nine Hostages

The Irish chroniclers tell us that Neil's mother, Carthan of the Black Locks, was taken captive by Eochaidh, his father, who already had had several sons by his queen,

Mung Fionn. Apprehensive lest, on the death of Eochaidh, the eldest son of a woman in bondage should deprive her own firstborn of his birthright, Eochaidh's queen secretly conveyed the baby Neil out of the palace of Tara, and left him to his fate on the cold hillside. There the helpless infant was discovered by Torna, the illustrious bard of Munster. Torna took the baby unto himself; and not long was Neil in the care of the bard when to Torna was foretold the future of his foster-son—a day would come when, throughout all the land, the child would be known as Niall Mór, or Neil the Great, as Niall Naoighiallach, Neil of the Nine Hostages. His heritage would wax in strength; and he would become the leader in battle of mighty hosts. And Neil would reign over Erin seven years and twenty; and his seed would inherit that land for unnumbered generations.

Sitchenn the Wizard

At the termination of a fosterage extending over some years, Torna led Neil back to Tara, to the hearth of Eochaidh, his father. Wrathful, indeed, had Queen Mung Fionn been on realising that Eochaidh had a deep-rooted affection for the son of Carthan of the Black Locks. Now she became doubly suspicious that Eochaidh intended Neil to succeed him as High-King of Ireland; and straightway she pleaded with her husband to select from among her own sons the one who, on his father's death, would ascend the throne of Erin.

“Sitchenn the Wizard will choose my heir from among thy sons,” replied Eochaidh. Besides being a seer, Sitchenn was a sword-smith of great renown; and he could

bring down the hammer on the anvil with such force as to cause the earth to tremble under the feet of those who stood by.

Neil is elected High-King

Came a day when King Eochaidh chanced to find all his sons assembled in the smithy, listening to the eldritch tales that Sitchenn the Wizard was wont to recount when the right mood was on him. And, clandestinely, Sitchenn put fire to his smithy ; and, discontinuing his tale-telling, he urged the sons of Eochaidh to carry out such tools and fittings as they could rescue.

Neil effected his exit, bearing the anvil and the block.

“ Neil vanquishes ! ” cried the Wizard ; “ and he shall be as a solid anvil for ever.”

Then came Brian out of the burning smithy, carrying the sledge-hammers—“ Brian to your fighters,” said the Wizard.

Next to Brian came Fiachra, salving the bellows and a pail of beer—“ Your beauty and your science with Fiachra,” said Sitchenn.

After Fiachra came Ailill, bearing the chest containing the weapons of war—“ Ailill to revenge you,” said the Wizard.

Last of all came Fergus, conveying a bundle of withered twigs, and a branch of yew—“ Fergus the Withered,”¹ said Sitchenn the Wizard.

And so Neil was elected to succeed his father as Ard-Righ or High-King of Erin.

¹ *The Clan MacNeil*, by MacNeil of Barra.

Neil's Campaigns furth of Erin

On ascending the throne, Neil's first undertaking was the subjugation of the lesser kings of Ireland, who, on the death of Eochaidh, had risen in revolt against his heir. A few years later found Neil in Dalriada on an expedition against the Picts, from whom he wrested Kintyre and much of the mainland of Argyll. Equal success attended his campaigns in Armorica and in Wales ; and in A.D. 405 he resolved to invade France and to "take hostages of Italy." So he raised a great army, and instructed Gabhran, the commander of his Dalriad troops, to follow him to the Loire with the pick of his men. Along with Gabhran went Eochaidh, the banished King of Leinster ; and the armies of Erin and Dalriada pitched camp on the banks of the Loire. And, while Neil and his subalterns sat by the river discussing matters of stratagem, did not Eochaidh, the banished King of Leinster, steal over to the opposite bank and discharge from his bow an arrow that took the life of Neil ?

That year (405) Neil's remains were borne home to Ireland, and interred near Tara.

Eoghan entertains Saint Patrick

From Neil Naoighiallach, Neil of the Nine Hostages, are said to have originated the MacNeils of Barra, and also their several cadets—the MacNeils of Taynish and Gigha, Vatersay, Brevaign, Ersary, Vaslan, Tarbert, Colonsay, Ugadale, etc. Robert Lister MacNeil, the present chief of

the MacNeils of Barra (whose portrait will be found at page 101 of this volume), claims to be the XLVth Chief from Neil of the Nine Hostages. Thus we see some justification for the old saying that at the time of the Flood the MacNeils, as well as the MacLeans, “had a boat o’ their ain.”

Neil was survived by fourteen sons, six of whom appear to have died without issue. He was succeeded by his son, Eoghan, who was King of Aileach and Prince of Ulster. Eoghan’s headquarters were on the Hill of Greenan, not far from Derry. There he is said to have entertained Saint Patrick, whom he met in the Fiodh Mhór (Great Wood), and by whom he was baptised in the name of the Church. When Eoghan died in 465, Muireadach, his son, reigned in his stead. Fifteen years later Muireadach was succeeded by his son, Muirceartach ; and enormous, to be sure, were the royal revenues of the Great Muirceartach while he reigned over Aileach. “The tributes of the King of Aileach and his stipends here ; and the tributes from his territories and his stipends of them—

“A hundred sheep and a hundred cloaks and a hundred hogs and a hundred red cows from Cuilentraidhe.

“Thirty hogs and thirty cows and thirty wethers from Tuath Ratha.

“Three hundred hogs and three hundred cows and three hundred wethers from the men of Lurg.

“Three hundred cows and three hundred beeves and a hundred tinnerns from the King of Ui Fiachrach.

“One hundred beeves, one hundred cows, one hundred hogs, and fifty cloaks from the Ui Mac Cnerthinn.

“Three hundred hogs, three hundred cows, and three hundred beeves from the Ciannachta of Glen Geimhin.

“ One hundred milch cows, fifty cloaks, and fifty hogs from the Ui Tuirtre.

“ One hundred beeves, one hundred milch cows, and fifty cloaks from the men of Magh Itha.”

The Stone of Destiny

Muirceartach fought many battles ; and he it is whom we associate with the ancient Lia Fail, or Stone of Destiny, on which the Scottish kings were crowned. The Lia Fail was first transferred to Dunstaffnage ; and later it found its way to Scone, near Perth, where it was “ reverently kept for the consecration of the Kings of Alban ” ¹ (*Qui lapis in eodem monasterio reverenter ob regum Albanie consecrationem servatur* ¹), until Edward I. carried it off to Westminster in 1296.

Now it forms part of the throne in Westminster Abbey. Though there are many traditional versions of its origin, Dean Stanley describes it in the Historical Memorials of Westminster Abbey thus :

“ The Lia Fail, or Stone of Destiny, Presented to Fergus, Prince of Argyll, ancestor of the Scottish Kings, by his grand-nephew Murcertac, Prince of Aileach and King of Ireland, A.D. 480-533.”

Neil the Showery

Between Muirceartach and Niall Frasach, or Neil the Showery, who was the Xth Chief from Neil of the Nine Hostages, five chiefs intervened—Donal (V.), Aodh (VI.), Maolfreach (VII.), Maelduin (VIII.), and Feargal (IX.).

¹ Skene's *Celtic Scotland*, and Fordun's *Chronicle*.

Neil the Showery retired to Iona after a reign of about seven years. There he died about 773. Great was the famine that swept over the land during Neil's suzerainty ; and the Chief prayed that provender might be sent his people. And in response to his supplication there fell from heaven—so tradition has it—a shower of white silver. But the silver could not appease the hunger of the people ; and so Neil prayed a second time, whereupon there fell a shower of honey. And, while Neil was offering up thanks for the shower of honey that had saved his people from death by starvation, lo ! there fell a shower of white wheat, covering all the fields of Aileach, “ so that there was such plenty and abundance of wheat that seemed able to maintain many kingdoms.”

“ The three showers of Ard-Uilinne ¹
From Heaven for love of Niall [fell] :
A shower of silver, a shower of wheat,
And a shower of honey.”

The Northmen invade Ireland

Neil the Showery was succeeded by his son, Hugh the Dignified, during whose chiefship the Northmen commenced to ravage Ireland in considerable numbers. Then came the chief called Niall Caille, or Neil of the Callan, who routed the Northmen on more than one occasion, but who, when returning from a campaign, was drowned in the River Callan in attempting to rescue one of his bodyguard. The next four chiefs—Hugh the Hoary (XIII.), Neil of the Black Knee (XIV.), Muirceartach (XV.), and Donal of Armagh (XVI.)—waged incessant warfare against the plun-

¹ *Annals of Ulster.*

derers from Lochlann. As a protection against the weather, Muirceartach (XV.) equipped his troops with leather cloaks. Hence he was known as Muirceartach of the Leather Cloaks.

The MacNeils of Barra

Not until we come to the XXIst Chief do we discover any definite connection between the MacNeils and the Island of Barra. Somewhere between 1030 and 1049, it is supposed, Neil, XXIst Chief and son of Hugh the Lonely, found his way to the Outer Hebrides, and established a colony on Barra. His coming to the Hebrides about this time is testified by several historical records, as well as by local tradition. From among such historical records may be cited the following extract from *The Scots Magazine* of 1763 :

“ 7th of May, 1763.—In Barra died Roderick McNeil, Esq., aged 70. He was the nineteenth generation from the first of his predecessors who settled in Barra in the time of Malcolm II., King of Scotland, about the year 1030, and the thirty-fifth generation from one of the six sons of Murtach (Muireadach), son of Owen (Eoghan), son of Neil of the Nine Hostages, King of Ireland in the year 371, from whom the O'Neils in Ireland and the MacNeils in Scotland derive their surnames.”

MacNeil of Barra contends that further evidence of Neil and his followers having come to the Hebrides about this time is supplied by the coincidence that *The Barra Register* begins in 1049 with Neil XXI., son of Hugh the Lonely. *The Barra Register* was a Gaelic chronicle recording clan successions and achievements, and handed down from one generation to another.

A Lost Document

In olden times (and, indeed, to a lesser degree at the present day) the verbal repetition of entire genealogical tables, dating back several centuries, was looked upon not as an unusual feat of memory, but as a piece of everyday knowledge. All clansmen worthy of the name strove to acquaint themselves with the lineage of their chieftain, as also with their own descent; and shame upon him who exhibited uncertainty on matters of clan genealogy. The Hebrideans inherit an abnormal partiality for genealogies. I know a number of old people in the Lewis who can trace descent back ten or twelve generations with the utmost ease and assurance.

Notable among the chroniclers who contributed to *The Barra Register* was the bardess, Nic Iain Fhinn, who composed not a few songs in praise of the MacNeils of Barra when she lived at Kisimul Castle. In more recent times the *Register* was kept by Hector MacNeil of Scurrival. The last entry in it was made by John, son of Hector MacNeil of Vaslan. All trace of this document has now been lost. It is believed that several sheets, either of the original manuscript or of a copy of it, were in the possession of the Rev. Angus MacNeil of Vatersay, guardian and tutor of Roderic the Gentle (XL.). A number of the older inhabitants of Barra used to declare that these sheets were seen in the hands of some of Angus MacNeil's descendants.

“ *Ballad of MacNeil of Barra* ”

The manner in which genealogy was handed down from generation to generation is well exemplified in “The Ballad of MacNeil of Barra,” a song noted from traditional renderings in the Western Isles by Marjorie Kennedy-Fraser. The words of this “Ballad,” with a literal translation, run as follows :

<i>O bhradaig dhuibh,</i>	Ye black thief, ye,
<i>Bhrìst na glasan,</i>	Breaker of locks,
<i>Hao-i-o-hi,</i>	
<i>A Mhuirceartaich</i>	Ye Sea-Carlin
<i>A' chochaill chraicinn</i>	Of the skin-husk,
<i>Cuiridh mi ort</i>	I will put on thee
<i>An dubh-chapaill.</i>	The black-shame.
<i>C'àit' an d'fhàg thu</i>	Where hast left
<i>Ruairi 'n Tartair ?</i>	Roderic the Turbulent ?
<i>'S a mhac cliuiteach</i>	His son namely,
<i>Nial a' Chaisteil ?</i>	Neil of the Castle ?
<i>'S Nial Glun-Dubh ?</i>	Neil of the Black-Knee ?
<i>'S Nial Frasach ?</i>	Neil the Showery ?
<i>Mo cheol-gàire</i>	My music of laughter
<i>Ruairi 'n Tartair,</i>	Is Ruairi the Turbulent,
<i>Bheireadh e fion</i>	He would give wine
<i>Do na h-eachaibh,</i>	To the horses,
<i>Chuireadh e cruidhean</i>	He would their feet
<i>Oir fo 'n casan,</i>	Have gold-shodden,
<i>Chuireadh e flùr</i>	He would put flowers
<i>Air an dealt dhaibh.</i>	On the dew for them.
<i>'S iomadh claidheamh</i>	Many a sword
<i>Gle-gheal, lasrach,</i>	Flashing, flaming,
<i>'S iomadh targaid</i>	Many a targe
<i>Fuilteach, sracach,</i>	Torn and blood-stained,
<i>Chunnaic mo shùil</i>	Saw my eye
<i>Anns a' chaisteal.</i>	In the castle.
<i>etc., etc.</i>	etc., etc.

Shod with a Gold Shoe

With reference to Roderic the Turbulent and the horses he would have “gold-shodden,” Kenneth MacLeod reminds us that a somewhat similar tradition is associated with the MacDonalds of Clan Ranald. When the Clan Ranald Chief intended making a journey to London, he used to instruct his blacksmith to shoe his horse with a gold shoe, and only a single nail in it, so that, when the horse lost the shoe in a busy London thoroughfare, the English barons would gather round it and, on picking it up, would say : “Sure the great Clan Ranald is in London : here is a golden shoe !”

In the Time of Bruce

A tradition current in the Barra Isles in the eighteenth century would seem to indicate that, during the chiefship of Neil XXI., the Scandinavian governor of the Hebrides made a treaty with the MacNeil of Barra by marrying Neil's daughter.¹ That the Norse exerted a powerful influence over the Western Isles at this time is proved by the fact that Neil's son, Aodh, was numbered among the West Highland chieftains who acknowledged the superiority of the Norse governor, and paid tribute to him.

Coming to the time of Robert the Bruce, we find that the MacNeils of Barra begin to occupy a definite place in Scottish history. For example, shortly after Bannockburn extensive properties in Kintyre were awarded by Bruce to

¹ *Old Statistical Account.*

a certain Neil Og, who, we have reason to believe, was one and the same person as Neil Og, XXVIth Chief of Barra.¹

Charter from the Lord of the Isles

When we come to the fifteenth century, we find the MacNeils of Barra on sure ground. In 1427 "Gilleownan Rodrici Murchardi Makneill" (Gilleonan XXIX.)² received from Alexander, Lord of the Isles, a charter of the Island of Barra and the lands of Boisdale, in South Uist.³ This Gilleonan met his death at Grissipoll, in Coll. His second wife was the daughter of MacLeod of the Harris, and the widow of MacLean of Duart. She possessed extensive lands in Coll, which MacNeil of Barra was eager to wrest from Iain Garbh, her younger son by MacLean. And so MacNeil took possession of the Castle of Breac-Achadh (Breachacha), in the Isle of Coll, and forced Iain Garbh to retire to Ireland. Some years later, however, he returned to Coll and renewed the crusade against Gilleonan, his stepfather. This feud is described at length by Boswell.³

Revocation of Charters

Owing to disturbances in the Hebrides about the year 1491, King James IV. felt constrained to revoke all the charters granted to the West Highland chiefs during his minority; and in the years 1493 and 1494 he actually sent expeditions against them. However, by 1495 he came to friendly terms with the Chief of Barra, since at Stirling in

¹ *Origines Parochiales Scotiæ.*

² *Reg. Mag. Sig.*, 1595.

³ Boswell's *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides.*

November of that year he confirmed, in the name of Gilleonan MacNeil, XXXI. (son of Roderic XXX.), the original charter granted in 1427 by Alexander, Lord of the Isles, to his grandfather, Gilleonan XXIX. This confirmation was witnessed by a number of interesting personages. Its terms may be referred to in the Register of the Great Seal of Scotland.¹

Thirteen years prior to the confirmation (*i.e.*, in 1482) this same Gilleonan fought at Bloody Bay under John, Lord of the Isles.

In course of time trouble arose in connection with the lands of Boisdale, for the MacDonalds of Clan Ranald were loth to recognise the rights of ownership in South Uist of any other clan, or to acknowledge any boundaries but those of the "inviolable sea." And the Clan Ranald seannachie describes how eventually Donald Mac Ailein drove the MacNeils out of South Uist, and vindicated Clan Ranald's ancient right to the *unciate* lands of Boisdale.

Hebridean Chiefs in Open Rebellion

The early years of the sixteenth century found Gilleonan XXXI. and a number of his clansmen in open rebellion. The collapse of the Lordship of the Isles, together with the fact that the Chief of Barra now held his lands by royal charter, tended to foster the amicable understanding which had sprung up between the MacNeils and the MacLeans of Duart. The West Highland confederacy, formed against King James and led by Torquil MacLeod of the Lewis and MacLean of Duart, consequent

¹ *Reg. Mag. Sig.*, 1595.

upon the escape from Innischonnel, in Loch Awe, of Donald Dubh, son of the Lord of the Isles, had brought matters to a climax. In 1503 Parliament, in a wild endeavour to smash the Highland confederacy, charged certain chieftains to proceed against MacLean of Duart and his principal supporters, and "to take and inbring the same and harry, destroy, and burn their lands." Among those so instructed was MacNeil of Barra. But the proclamation proved ineffective; and in the end the King was obliged to outlaw several chieftains, including MacNeil. Gilleonan XXXI. and many of his kinsmen were summoned to compear before Parliament to answer for such treasonable acts as they had committed; and, needless to add, they openly defied the summonses. Parliament proclaimed that, if any person should apprehend, and bring to the King, MacLean of Lochbuy, great MacLeod of the Lewis, or MacNeil of Barra, "he shall receive the half of these rebels' lands. . . ." More than once were the Barra Isles in danger of being forfeited to the Crown through the rebellious behaviour of their Chiefs.

Precept of Remission

Howbeit, another rising in 1513 brought MacNeil of Barra (Gilleonan XXXII.) and MacLean of Duart into disagreement with the other chieftains who revolted in support of a candidature for the Lordship of the Isles. Wherefore they withdrew from the confederacy. As a result of their having done so, the Regent Albany, in 1517, granted to them and their kin a precept of remission "for all that passed before the date thereof, 12 March, 1516-7."¹

¹ *Registrum Secreti Sigilli Regum Scotorum*, Vol. V.

That the MacNeils of Barra and the MacNeils of Gigha are of common descent appears erroneous to Gregory, since, on the forfeiture of the Lordship of the Isles, the former branch followed MacLean of Duart, whereas the latter followed MacDonald of Islay.¹ Thus, when in the sixteenth century the MacLeans and the MacDonalds came into deadly conflict, the two main branches of the MacNeils found themselves in opposing camps. This circumstance, when coupled with the facts that their armorial bearings differ, and the Christian names used by one branch are (with one exception) unknown to the other, seems to Gregory to indicate that the MacNeils of Barra and the MacNeils of Gigha are of different origin.

In the time of Gilleonan XXXIII. summonses for treason were again issued against certain Highland chiefs. Gilleonan himself was cited among those who conspired against the royal authority. He had brought himself into ill-favour by his having assisted the Sassenachs in ravaging Bute and Arran with fire. In 1546, however, Queen Mary granted remission to Gilleonan MacNeil of Barra and others for the part they had taken in this insurrection.²

Roderic the Turbulent

Perhaps the most celebrated of all the chiefs of Barra was Roderic XXXV.—better known as Ruairi 'n Tartair, or Roderic the Turbulent. In the space at our disposal it would be impossible even to allude to all the deeds of derring-do and lawlessness performed by Ruairi 'n Tartair and his henchmen. As related at length in the previous

¹ Gregory's *History of the Western Highlands of Scotland*.

² *Reg. Sec. Sig.*, Vol. XIX.

chapter, his main hobby was piracy.¹ You will recall, too, that Roderic the Turbulent joined MacLeod of the Harris and the Captain of Clan Ranald in supporting Neil MacLeod of the Lewis against the colonising proclivities of the Fife Adventurers, with the result that in 1607 the "speculators" again were compelled to abandon their scheme for the reduction of the Long Island.

"An Hereditary Out-law"

Ruairi MacNeil, XXXVth Chief of Barra, assisted the MacLeods of Lewis also against the overweening ambitions of the MacKenzies. Alluding to the refractory attitude of MacNeil of Barra toward the latter, a genealogy of the MacKenzies, written about 1669 by "a Person of Quality," informs us that through Ruairi MacKenzie's exertions "all the Isles were composed and accorded in their debates, & settled in their Estates, from whence a full Peace ensued amongst the Islanders, MacNeil of Barray excepted, who had been an Hereditary Out-law."²

The Spirit of Adventure

A proclamation issued in 1611 ordered MacNeil and others to desist from aiding and abetting the Lewis rebels. In 1612 the Lords of Secret Council again were concerned with the manner in which the Chief of Barra was rendering help to the MacLeods of the Lewis, who had risen in arms against Ruairi MacKenzie, the Tutor of Kintail, and his crafty retinue.

¹ See *Behold the Hebrides!*

² MacFarlane's *Genealogical Collections*, Vol. I.

Roderic the Turbulent lived to a ripe old age. He, I believe, is the chief who was "sex or sevin score of yeares as he himself did say," and of whom the following unique account was written: "This antient man in tyme of his youth being a valiant and stout man of warr and hearing from skippers that oftymes were wont to travell to ane Illand which the Inhabitants of the Illand alledged this McNeill and his predecessors should be their Superiors, which Illand is sein oftymes from the tope of the mountaines of Barray.

"This Rorie hearing oftymes the same newes reported to him and his predecessors, he fraughted a shipe but no-ways could find the Illand, at last was driven to Ireland on the West syd theroff. And took up a Spreath, and returned home thereafter."¹

Neil Og and his Cautioner

Not uneventful was the career of Neil Og (XXXVI.) who succeeded his father, Roderic the Turbulent, as Chief of Barra. That Neil Og had inherited the lawless tendencies of his father is shown by the record that at Holyrood in 1629 Sir John MacKenzie of Tarbet, who, after the death of his father (the aforementioned Tutor of Kintail), was superior of the Island of Barra, became cautioner for his compearance "anes in tua yeir . . . under the pane of ane thousand pundis."²

¹ MacFarlane's *Genealogical Collections*, Vol. II.

² *Privy Council Register*, 1629.

A Diplomatic Chief

Gilleonan XXXVII. exhibited qualities more diplomatic than did either his father, Neil Og, or his grandfather, Ruairi the Turbulent. Through the marriages of his sons into powerful and influential West Highland families, Gilleonan was able to live a life comparatively free from turmoil and strife. About this time the MacNeils seem to have given over much of their pristine conduct, and thereby to have won the favour of the central authority. We know, for instance, that in 1688 Gilleonan's son, Black Roderic (XXXVIII.), received a Crown charter respecting Barra and the adjacent Isles, thus restoring to him the privilege of holding his lands direct from the King, which privilege had been forfeited to MacKenzie of Kintail in the time of Ruairi the Turbulent.

On the deposition of James II. the Hebridean chieftains rallied to the Jacobite standard, and fought at Killiecrankie in 1689 under "Bonnie Dundee." Two years later Black Roderic MacNeil of Barra was included among those who failed to take the oath of allegiance to William and Mary ; and we find that he and his clan played a prominent part in the '15 Rising.¹

Black Roderic Challenges Rob Roy

No warrior was there in all Scotland more dexterous in the mystery of swordsmanship than Black Roderic—so Black Roderic and his kinsmen imagined ! Having heard

¹ Burt's *Letters*, Vol. II.

one day that Rob Roy (with whom he was contemporary) had also made a somewhat similar claim to prowess, Black Roderic aspired to "try" the Red MacGregor. Whereat he journeyed southward from the Hebrides with this object in view. When he arrived at Loch Lomondside, he learned that Rob Roy had gone to a fair at Killearn. Off went the Chief of Barra in quest of him; and, when nearing Killearn, he met a number of men on horseback, who were just returning from the fair. Accosting one of them, Black Ruairi made inquiries as to the whereabouts of Rob Roy.

"He is here," replied the horseman whom he had accosted; "and what will you be wanting with him?"

"Well," continued the MacNeil, "I am the Chief of Barra; and they are telling me that you consider yourself a better swordsman than I am. So I have come all this way to prove that you are not."

"Though I have little desire to fight a man without just cause," said Rob Roy, dismounting the while, "I shall accept your challenge; and, though you be a stranger to me, you shall not go without your deserts."

Now, only on one occasion was Rob Roy known to have declined a challenge. The challenge on that occasion came from a certain Donald Bain; and MacGregor's reason for having declined was that he fought duels only with gentlemen.

Without further explanation or ado, Black Roderic and Rob Roy set to. Now Rob Roy was notorious both for the length and strength of his arms. So long were they, indeed, that, when he stood erect, his finger-tips touched his garters. Hence he wielded the claymore to some purpose. Scarcely was the duel begun when the Chief of Barra found reason to regret his temerity, since his antago-

nist nearly took the sword arm off him with one fell swipe, thus necessitating his detention in the village of Killearn for some months.

In due course Black Ruairi returned to Barra ; and never again was he putting trouble on Rob Roy.

Black Roderic and the Warrior of Sealltuinn

This same Black Ruairi (or Black Roderic the Unjust, as he sometimes was called) also went on an expedition to Sealltuinn (Shetland) ; and the island seannachie relates how, on his arrival there in an eight-oared galley, fully manned, he provoked the Warrior of Sealltuinn to mortal combat, and threatened to take tribute from him.¹ Now there was among Ruairi's crew a widow's son of prodigious strength. He had been reared in Kisimul Castle ; and he was the mightiest of MacNeil's men-at-arms. Jealous, to be sure, was Black Roderic that the Castle of Kisimul should retain a man stronger than he ; and, therefore, not few were the schemes he laid to get rid of the widow's son.

Before the duel with the Warrior of Sealltuinn commenced, Black Roderic MacNeil, Chief of Barra, had said to the widow's son : " When you see me taking a step back in the fight, you will know that I am growing weak. When you see me looking back once, the fight will be going against me. When I look back a second time, you will realise that I am exhausted, and will expect you to step into my place. And, if you finish the fight successfully, we shall divide the spoil of Sealltuinn."

When MacNeil could sustain the fight no longer, he

¹ Alexander MacDonald in *The Celtic Review*, 1905.

gave an eye over his shoulder a second time, whereupon the widow's son stepped into the breach. After he and the Warrior had been sparring for some time, Black Roderic, impatient for the death of the latter, called out to the widow's son, "Give the Warrior the end he deserves!" And in a trice lay the severed head of the Warrior of Sealltuinn on the ground.

When the widow's son realised that he had slain an opponent whom he intended merely to wound, he turned to Black Roderic, who had incited him, and said, "You son of the other man! You I blame for the death of the innocent; and if you and your crew do not take your feet out of here and put them in the galley, there will not be a live man among you. Spoil you shall not 'lift' in these Islands, for I now am laird of Sealltuinn."

So Black Roderic and his men beat a hasty retreat to their galley, for the widow's son had put the fear of death on them.

And that is how a MacNeil first found his way to the Northern Isles; and there are descendants of him in Sealltuinn to this day.

How Black Roderick died

The story is told of how Black Roderic the Unjust met his death. With this same eight-oared galley and a resolute crew, he sailed to the Isle of Mull on a cattle-lifting venture. Cloth wrapped he round the oars of his galley, lest they should be noisy in the rowlocks; and at nightfall he and his men put ashore below Duart Castle. They crept up to the Castle in stealth; and not a soul did there appear to be about the whole place except a little lame tailor who,

with legs crossed in professional fashion, sat sewing in the alcove of a window. So Black Roderic MacNeil rushed in upon him, and was about to put him to death and ransack the Castle, when a watchman, emerging from concealment, thrust a dirk into the thigh of him.

Seizing the dirk, and holding it tightly in position, Black Roderic sped to his galley, and ordered his crew to put back post-haste to Barra, that he might expire in his ancestral hall. And, whenever he set foot in Kisimul Castle, he let go his hold of the dirk, and out of him went the life that was in him.

Thus died Black Roderic the Unjust (XXXVIII.).

Dove of the West

After Black Roderic came Roderic XXXIX., a chief who, in virtue of his peaceful disposition, was called Roderic the Dove of the West. It was during his term of office that Prince Charlie came to the Barra Isles in the good ship *La Doutelle*. For his share in the " 'Forty-five," Roderic was taken in custody to London with others, but was released in July, 1747, on the passing of the Act of Indemnity.

Another genial chief of Barra was Roderic XL., who in 1763 succeeded his grandfather, Roderic the Dove of the West, and who was known as Roderic the Gentle. Accompanied by a number of clansmen, he went to America about 1776, and took part in the War of American Independence. He died at Manchester in 1822, and was succeeded in the chiefship by his son, Roderic XLI., who entered on a military career in 1808, and rose to the rank of general.

The Last MacNeil of Barra

In 1863 "The General," as he was called, died in London, leaving no male issue. Owing to the failure of the kelp industry and to the widespread economic depression in the West Highlands and Islands, he had been compelled to sell Barra to Colonel Gordon of Cluny, to whose daughter the property now belongs. General Roderic MacNeil is spoken of as the last MacNeil of Barra. On his death the chiefship passed over to the lineal representative of Roderic MacNeil of Brevaig, and in the person of Hector Edward MacNeil XLII., who in turn was succeeded by his son, Iain XLIII. Roderic MacNeil of Brevaig emigrated to Nova Scotia about 1802. Iain XLIII. died in 1893, when the chiefship devolved upon his son, Roderic Ambrose XLIV.

Robert Lister's Petition

And now to the present Chief of the MacNeils of Barra—Robert Lister XLV. He was born in December of 1889, and succeeded to the chiefship in May, 1915, the year following upon the death at Norfolk, Virginia, of his father, the aforementioned Roderic Ambrose XLIV.

In 1915 the Lord Lyon King of Arms issued judgment in a petition presented by Robert Lister MacNeil to grant warrant to the Lyon Clerk to matriculate in the Public Register of All Arms and Bearings in Scotland, in name of the petitioner, the ensigns armorial pertaining to the Chief of the MacNeils of Barra, all as recorded in the Register on 29th December, 1824, by General Roderic MacNeil of Barra. Roderic Ambrose MacNeil, father of the petitioner,

and nearest heir male to the last Chief of the Clan MacNeil, expressed the desire that after his death the chiefship should devolve upon his second son, the petitioner. He passed over his elder son, because the latter had virtually renounced allegiance to the King by his becoming an American citizen. Roderic Ambrose XLIV. died in 1914.

So now I have given you a brief survey of the chiefs of Barra, and of their descent from Neil of the Nine Hostages. Those wishing to investigate this genealogy more closely would be well advised to consult Robert Lister's *Clan MacNeil*, a volume from which I have quoted extensively in this treatise.

Martin's Visit to Barra

I think it will be conceded by all who have any knowledge of the subject, that by far the most instructive, contemporaneous account of clan customs is that furnished by Martin Martin, who travelled through the Western Isles toward the close of the seventeenth century. Though Martin failed to coax the cockman to allow him to examine Kisimul Castle in the absence of the chief and his lady, he did not scorn the opportunity of recording many of the customs prevalent in MacNeil's domain at the time of his visit.¹

Martin tells us that the then MacNeil of Barra was the thirty-fourth of that name by lineal descent, "if the present genealogers may be credited." However, according to the genealogical table I have just sketched, the chief of Martin's time appears to have been Roderic XXXVIII. Martin

¹ Martin's *Description of the Western Isles of Scotland*.

mentions, moreover, that the chief held his lands in vassalage of Sir Donald MacDonald of Sleat, to whom he paid £40 per annum, and for whom he was obliged to find a hawk, and furnish a certain number of men upon extraordinary occasions.

MacNeil and his Tenants

It is evident from Martin's account that the MacNeil exercised very extensive duties toward his tenants. For example, when the wife of a tenant on any of the Barra Isles died, the tenant immediately notified the MacNeil of his loss. Thereupon MacNeil proceeded to arrange a suitable match for him, since, without a wife, "he cannot manage his affairs, nor beget followers to MacNeil, which would prove a public loss to him."

In a similar manner a widow addressed herself to the chief, who, likewise, provided another husband for her. Forthwith the wedding was arranged: no time was put off in preliminary courtship. And MacNeil was in the habit of contributing to the marriage festivities "a bottle of strong waters."

When, owing to the inclemency of the weather or other unavoidable cause, a tenant lost one or more milch cows, MacNeil of Barra compensated him by supplying him with cows to the number of his loss. And, when a tenant became too old and decrepit to till his land, MacNeil is said to have taken him into his own family and maintained him there during the remainder of his life.

Despite the chief's generosity, however, Martin mentions that the natives would not go fishing when MacNeil or his steward were in the neighbourhood, "lest, seeing

their plenty of fish, perhaps they might take occasion to raise their rents."

A Poor Crofter's Plight

The jurisdiction of the chiefs of Barra over their tenants, and the manner in which the latter acquiesced, are remembered in a number of quaint, traditionary tales still current among the older inhabitants of the Barra Isles. Reminiscent of the chief's office as mediator is the following folk-tale I collected in Barra last autumn. There lived at Cuier a poor crofter, whose comparatively rich brother-in-law was a crofter at Allasdale. Came ashore a great quantity of sea-wrack at Cuier after a prolonged storm ; and, as they do to this day, the crofters living in the locality forgathered on the shore at Cuier to lead away the sea-wrack to their respective holdings, for manuring purposes. Despondent was the poor crofter at Cuier because he had no horse to assist him in conveying his share of sea-wrack from the shore ; and so his wife urged him to hasten away to the croft of his brother-in-law at Allasdale with the object of borrowing his horse, or his mare, or his colt. Well, he got the loan of the mare ; and, after a day of leading sea-weed from the shore to the fields on which he intended spreading it, the overwrought mare collapsed and died.

Now the owner of the mare was expecting compensation in respect of the death of his animal. But the crofter at Cuier was poor, and had nothing to give by way of compensation. Resolved, however, to obtain some redress, the crofter at Allasdale brought the circumstances attending the mare's death to the notice of MacNeil of Barra, who

acted as legal adviser and official umpire in all matters touching his tenants. On asking the Cuier crofter what he was in a position to pay, the former replied : “ *Tha mi air mo naireachadh*—I am on my shame ” (I am ashamed)—for few were his worldly possessions.

When MacNeil learnt of the penury of the Cuier crofter, and realised how his *naireachadh* or shame had restrained him from showing himself out-of-doors, he took pity on him ; and, knowing that the Allasdale crofter still owned a horse and a colt, he directed that the colt be handed over to him in deference to his *naireachadh*.

An Attitude of Contempt and Defiance

Speaking generally, the attitude of the chiefs of the Barra Isles to the Crown was one of contempt ; and not seldom did their lawlessness engage the attention and tax the resources of Parliament and Privy Council. For instance, we find that the roll of broken clans in the Highlands and Islands, contained in an Act of Parliament “ For punishment of thift, reiff, oppressioun, and soirning,” included the unruly MacNeils of Barra.¹

So distant were the Barra Isles in respect of the central authority, that peculiar difficulty was often experienced in serving upon its malefactors the personal summonses necessary to ensure attendance before a court of law. Historical records frequently report : “ *MacNele sæpe vocatus, sed non comparet* ”—MacNeil often called, but does not appear.

Among the correspondence written by the Earl of

¹ *Collectanea de Rebus Albanicis*.

Argyll to William Carstares, and included in the State Papers and Letters addressed to the said Carstares (who, by the way, was confidential secretary to King William during the whole of his reign, and afterwards Principal of the University of Edinburgh), is a letter dispatched from Inveraray in September, 1700, adverting to the pacification of the Highland clans, and containing the following reference to MacNeil of Barra : “ I received a letter yesterday from M’Neill of Barra, who lives very far off, sent by a gentleman, in all formality offering his service, which had made you laugh to see his entry. His stile of his letter runs as if he were of another kingdom.”

V

BLUE BARRA OF THE SHIPS

WEST HIGHLAND TRANSPORT

BARRA without ships would be as difficult to imagine as the Island of Lewis without peats, or as a desert place wanting in sand. During the summer months, when the fishings are in full swing, boats are passing in and out of Castlebay all day long, and even throughout the short-lived summer night. In the height of the season Castlebay harbour is a place of perpetual movement from early dawn till long after dusk. If herring-drifters be not racing in from the fishing grounds so as to be in time for the auctioning of their catches at the Fish Mart between the hours of 9 and 10 a.m., they are moving out from the pier to the various curing stations, whose agents have purchased their respective catches.

Having unloaded at the curing stations, such of them as are in danger of running short of fuel swarm round Duncan MacIver's coal hulk, lying out in the harbour, in order to have their bunkers replenished. The hulk presently at anchor off the port of Barra was towed down all the way from Stornoway ; and you should cast a glance in the direction of this hulk about noon, when as many as twenty steam-drifters are moored around her, awaiting their turn. Steam-drifters consume great quantities of

coal, for which reason their working costs are considerable. Coal hulks at seaports so situated as Stornoway or Castlebay must bring in a substantial revenue to their owners—more than the meagre wages of a score of miners who labour under very indifferent conditions to win the coal in the first instance !

Barra's International Commerce

In addition to the fleet actually engaged in the landing of herrings at Castlebay, Barra is visited from time to time by vessels so large that they cannot come alongside the pier, and are obliged in consequence to drop anchor at a convenient distance from the shore. When the fishings are good, great cargo vessels come all the way from Hamburg, Stettin, Danzig, and other Baltic ports to load herrings at Castlebay. Through these ports are reached the great masses of consumers of herrings cured in the Western Isles. The best herrings, however, frequently go direct from Barra to New York. Think of the little, insignificant island of Barra being in more direct and constant communication with Germany and Russia and Poland and America than, say, the world-renowned cities of Edinburgh and Birmingham ! In midsummer one might see a greater number of migratory foreigners on the quay at Castlebay of an afternoon than in Edinburgh during a whole week.

Ships that come in the Night

Often in the silence of the night one may hear the warning signal of a ship out in the Minch, and making for Castlebay. You never can tell exactly at what hour cargo



THE MACNEIL OF BARRA (ROBERT LISTER, 1889-), XLV.

boats from distant lands may arrive for consignments of cured herrings, although telegraphic messages usually give some indication as to when they may be expected. Ships from the Baltic ports arrive at all hours of the day and night ; and, if conditions be favourable, they invariably depart whenever they load. In the small hours of the morning a prolonged blast of a ship's whistle sometimes pierces the quiet of this Hebridean Isle. If you peer out of your window in the airt of the harbour bar, you may discern the foremast light of a foreign ship, throbbing haven-wise by Muldoanich. Suddenly the throbbing ceases, and you hear the fizzing of steam, the rattle of capstans, the clanging of chains, the plop of anchors in the cool, shimmering darkness—aye, and often a still, small voice borne landward across the benighted bay. And so this strange foreigner, bulwarked high above the Hebridean tide, and striving to cast into it shadows as deep and long and mysterious as those of the neighbouring hills, rides at anchor, perhaps half a mile off the pier.

Can you conceive a setting more akin to the real poetry of the Isles than that created by the arrival, during the lambent summer night, of such a vessel ?

Flit-boats and Stock-boats

With the breaking of dawn, preparations are made for the loading of the foreign cargo vessel. Consigners of barrelled herrings having been advised of her coming a day or two in advance, those employed on the curing stations concerned endeavour to have their consignments in readiness for immediate transhipment by means of flit-boats. The term flit-boat is used to denote the type of small

barge that is employed in translating the barrels of cured herrings from the landing-stages adjoining the curing stations to the cargo vessels that, on account of their size and draught, are obliged to anchor offshore. A flit-boat acts simply as a tender : it attends upon the larger vessel. I believe the term originated in Shetland, where paucity of piers and the inferiority of landing-places have rendered flit-boats indispensable.

Two or three large foreign ships frequently happen to arrive at Barra about the same time, with the result that they are all engaged in loading cured herrings simultaneously. When this occurs, flit-boats are crossing and re-crossing the harbour all day, and often throughout the greater part of the night.

Another class of ship inseparably associated with the fishing industry is that commonly designated the stock-boat. At varying intervals stock-boats from Fraserburgh and Peterhead sail for Barra with cargoes of empty barrels and salt for curing purposes. And then Barra occasionally is visited by a deep-dipping collier, coming hither to refill the hold of the old wooden coal hulk, alongside of which the steam-drifters are refuelled.

Fleet of Five Hundred Sail-boats

At this stage it may be apposite to introduce a few casual remarks adverting to the Barra fishings. The motto of Stornoway—" God's Providence is our Inheritance "—is equally applicable to Castlebay, so far as its inhabitants are dependent on the harvest of the sea. In herring circles Castlebay is a name to be reckoned with, for it is the hall-mark of quality and delicacy. The Barra herrings

contain much fat ; and it is the proud boast of the local fishermen that " Castlebay herrings can be fried without the aid of cooking fat, and a panful of fat left over after the frying." The accuracy of the foregoing statement has been verified in Barra. Before the advent of steam and motor propulsion in fishing-boats (prior, let us say, to the year 1900) a fleet of five hundred large sail-boats frequented Barra to take part in the early summer herring fishing. The bulk of this fleet was composed chiefly of boats belonging to Moray Firth fishermen. The Castlebay season lasted from early in May until the end of June, when the fleet dispersed to fish out of east coast ports. To say that five hundred boats operated from Castlebay is no wild exaggeration. My cousin, Alasdair MacDonald, often speaks of the days when sailing vessels were so numerous that, literally, it was possible to cross over from Castlebay to the Island of Vatersay by stepping over sailing craft.

To have seen some hundreds of wherries sailing out of Castlebay in a series of concentric arcs, with no more than a cable's length between the two vessels crossing the channel followed by the mail-steamer from Oban, must have presented a grand spectacle. You may picture what the land-locked harbour of Castle Bay looked like at the week-ends, with four or five hundred large sail-boats spread over it. And, though most of the crews lived aboard their vessels, one can well imagine the industry and activity of this Hebridean seaport when its population was increased temporarily by between 3,000 and 3,500 souls.

A Prosperous Industry

And so plentiful were herrings at times that a shortage of farlins to contain them necessitated the temporary dumping of hundreds of thousands of them on the ground impinging upon the curing stations. In those days the stations were so close to one another that a frontage of twenty feet on the harbour was not available. In those days, moreover, line-fishing was a remunerative occupation among the Western Isles. Largely owing to the destruction by trawling of the spawning beds and of millions of immature fish, this industry has dwindled almost to vanishing point. That from the latter years of the eighteenth century till within a few decades ago line-fishing was a prosperous industry is proved by several statistical records. For example, MacNeil of Vatersay estimated that in 1787 no fewer than 30,000 ling were dispatched from Barra to Glasgow alone.

To-day one may see as many as twenty or thirty drifters racing out of Castle Bay about the same time to the fishing grounds ; and it would delight many to wander round to Orosay or Ru-fear Vatersay in the late afternoon to count them as they steam past, often obscuring the Island of Muldoanich in wreaths of black smoke. Nimble is the word to apply to these herring-drifters. They are speedy and reliable and good sea-going in every sense ; and they can ride through almost any tempest if adroitly handled. But, for all that, they are wanting in the poetry and old-world simplicity of the sail-boats they have displaced so rapidly.

If the steaming seaward of twenty or thirty drifters be

a sight, consider what the entrance to Castle Bay looked like when four or five hundred wherries sailed out about the same time !

Speed and Mobility of the Drifter

Formerly the herring fishing grounds extended from Barra Head to about forty miles west to north-west thereof. That is to say, on the Atlantic side of the Barra Isles. The great fishing fleet passed to and fro between Castlebay and the Atlantic by Caolis and the Sound of Vatersay. Nowadays the crews fish mainly on the east side of the island—in the Minch. Rarely are the west side grounds tried.

Much smaller is the fleet now operating from Castlebay. All told, it would not exceed a hundred vessels, including steam, motor, and sail driven. Moray Firth boats still comprise the greater part of this fleet, which consists of steam-drifters. The Barra fishermen seek their livelihood with motor and sail-boats. The modern herring-drifters, steam or motor propelled, have much greater powers of mobility than had the old sailing vessels they eclipsed. Consequently the crews of the former do not settle readily at one port, but are prone to chase the elusive herring to the most prolific grounds. When they hear of good catches, they are off to the grounds on which they were secured, in the hope that they may prove more than a mere “ flash in the pan.”

Threepence per Herring

It was the herrings caught on the west coast that made Castlebay famous as a fishing centre. The herrings were cured gutted as “ matjes ” (maties). “ Matje ” is a trade

term for a virgin herring (*i.e.*, a herring lacking milt or roe, which has undergone a soft cure and is intended for early consumption). A herring in a "matje" condition contains the fat that a developed herring lacks.

In former times the great bulk of the herrings cured at Castlebay were shipped direct to Russia, St. Petersburg having been the principal receiving centre. But the Great War and the subsequent severing of diplomatic relations with the Soviet have changed the old order. Germany and the United States are the chief markets to-day. In pre-War years, when the demand in Russia far exceeded the supply, prices for Castlebay herrings were known to have risen to £10 per barrel, or approximately 3*d.* per herring.

To Mass at Castlebay

In striking contrast with the bustle of weekdays is the comparative inactivity that, in the height of the season, characterises Castlebay from Fridays till Tuesdays. Not many boats land their catches at Barra on Saturdays; and the mail-steamer does not call between Friday and Tuesday. On Saturdays the majority of the fishing fleet goes to Oban, where week-end prices may be higher, and where the crews are afforded an opportunity of purchasing a greater variety of domestic supplies, and conceivably at cheaper rates. And then, as a Barra fisherman explained to me, "some of the lads like to be in town a bit, and go to the 'pictures' and things like that"—in Oban! And why not?

Nevertheless, a few drifters are moored close together by the pier over the week-ends; and a few lie at anchor in the harbour until late on Mondays, when they return to the fishing grounds to catch such herrings as are auctioned

on Tuesdays. On Saturday afternoons the fishermen mend their nets, or bark them, and then spread them out on the grass or hang them over a fence or dyke to dry. Sunday is a day of rest : Monday in Castlebay, so far as the fishing industry is concerned, may be described as the fish trade holiday.

However, the maritime quietness that pervades the port of Barra during the week-ends is broken a little on Sunday forenoons, when five or six boats, sailing in processional style, convey the Islesfolk over from Watersay to Mass in Castlebay. And bonnie, indeed, are the boats that continually are plying between Barra and the Isle of Watersay. Some of them are painted white : others are blue. Some are brown-canvased : others are white-winged, and have a rhythmic slant on their masts. And each one of them has a freshness about it that delights the eye and soothes the spirit. As they return to Watersay after service, all keeping up-wind at the same angle, they begin to assume the appearance of a wedge of mere dots upon the blue until, one by one, they vanish out of sight.

" Farewell " to Barra

When the fishings commence to fall off, the numbers of temporary residents in Blue Barra of the Ships gradually dwindle. The departure at the termination of the season of the last of the curers and their supernumeraries usually takes the shape of an informal " Farewell to the Fish Trade." I recollect being present at such a " farewell " in Barra. The last batch on this occasion was due to leave by the *Dunara Castle*, which lay at anchor some little distance off the pier at Castlebay until the *Cygnets* had

called on her return voyage from Loch Boisdale at midnight. When at length the *Dunara Castle* came alongside, small herds of cattle and sheep had to be put aboard, during which time the pier was a thronging mass of people of all ages, who, in the faint glimmer produced by one or two lanterns, danced reels to the bagpipes, and shouted in the Gaelic while they danced.

A few minutes before the *Dunara Castle* let go, the piper marched up and down the pier playing the appropriate tune, "Leaving Glen Urquhart." The whole incident was an interesting one in so far as it portrayed an old language, and the old traditions identified with it, fighting like the very devil for their existence against the sinister ramifications of commercialism and cash considerations.

Ships with Sundry Supplies

Apart altogether from the vessels connected either directly or indirectly with the fishing industry, many other boats call at Blue Barra of the Ships. Occasionally the Antrim Iron Ore boats (*Glentaise* and *Glendun*) come into Castlebay on their voyages between Northern Ireland and the Tees, and unload sundry supplies ; while the *Sagittarius* and the *Dunara Castle* and MacCallum's boat, the *Hebrides*, pay periodic visits, bringing with them the merchandise of the multiple store. Sometimes tramp steamers and even vessels of considerable tonnage steer into Castle Bay when delayed by contrary weather, or by engine trouble, or when threatened with a shortage of coal or water. Water, like coal, is a vendible commodity at Castlebay, as at most of the world's seaports ; and at the port of Barra water is by no means cheap. Whereas sailing-boats and steam-



A DAY IN JUNE AMONG THE BARRA ISLES: PART OF THE BARRA FISHING
FLEET AT ANCHOR OFF CASTLEBAY.



HERRING DRIFTERS ASSEMBLED ROUND THE PIER AT CASTLEBAY.

drifters may be supplied with water *ad libitum* for domestic purposes at the taps close to the curing stations, boiler and tankage water at the pier is charged at the rate of 7s. 6d. for each fill of the boiler, and 5s. for each fill of the boiler tank.

It is only about twenty years since the houses in Castlebay and the curing stations around the harbour had water laid on, following upon the completion of the reservoir at Loch Uisge, above the Glen. Up to that time, of course, the great bulk of the fishing fleet consisted of sail-boats. The gradual displacement of the old wherry by the steam-drifter naturally increased the demand for fresh water out of all proportion to the supply.

State-owned Ships

Then ships which are the property of the State call at Barra, as, for example, the fishery cruisers. The Northern Lighthouse Commissioners' vessels also come into Castle Bay, either when the *Pharos* is on her customary tour of inspection, or when reliefs are being effected and stores and provisions replenished. Furthermore, in connection with the lighthouse service, Donald MacAulay sails regularly to Barra Head from Castlebay, when weather permits. And sometimes an odd brigantine or a privately owned yacht drops anchor in the harbour.

West Highland Transport

The most regular caller at Castlebay under auspicious weather conditions is the mail-steamer, *Cygnnet*, which makes Barra on her voyage from Oban to South Uist. The *Cygnnet* is a component part of Messrs. MacBrayne's

antiquated fleet which frequently has been the subject of comment in the House of Commons in respect of its being one of the lifelong bugbears of the West Highland people. Though in some ways an excellent sea-going boat, its steerage accommodation, either for man or for beast, may be described as terrible to a degree. Only a few months ago the member for Argyll remarked in the House that the accommodation for horses aboard the *Cygnets* was superior to the accommodation for passengers.

The West Highland steamer service has been a long-standing grievance ; but the new transport arrangements recently announced for the Western Isles would seem to indicate that matters are likely to improve. In common with their island neighbours, the inhabitants of Barra, ever since the War, have been the victims of a service deplorably inadequate ; and they now feel that their grievance will become permanent unless and until the Railway Companies consider the taking over of the transport service to the Isles.

A Geographical Misnomer

Before the War, Coll and Tiree had a service of their own, and the Barra mail-steamer sailed direct to Castlebay from Tobermory by the north of Coll. Recent alterations presumed to treat Barra as one of the *Inner* Isles. A glance at a map is sufficient to demonstrate the stupidity of such an arrangement, as also the fact that, having called at Coll and Tiree and passed through Gunna Sound into the open sea, the remainder of the voyage to Castlebay is undoubtedly the most exposed and dangerous made by any West Highland mail-steamer. When the skipper thinks that it will be impossible to call at Coll or Tiree, the

passengers for these Isles are advised to disembark at Tobermory, lest they be carried on unavoidably to Barra ; and, when a wild crossing is anticipated, it sometimes is suggested to Castlebay and Loch Boisdale passengers that, for their own comfort and peace of mind, they, too, should consider the advisability of leaving the boat at Tobermory.

Proposed Overtures to the Railway Companies

The importance of taking advantage of the proposed statutory powers sought by the Railway Companies with regard to road transport to press for an improvement in the transport conditions in the West Highlands and Islands was discussed at a recent meeting of the M.P.'s representing the Highland constituencies. The view expressed was that the Railway Companies, without altering existing rail-heads and without injuring any existing island fishing industry, ought to enter into an obligation to serve the Islands by steamers. Fears that, in the event of such powers being granted, the Railway Companies might inaugurate a service which would divert all the fish traffic from Stornoway to a new rail-head or motor terminus were expressed by the member for the Western Isles. Therefore the meeting passed a resolution in the following guarded terms : " If the industries of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland are to be saved, and the country generally to be developed, increased and co-ordinated transport must be established ; and in view of the extended power for road transport for which they now ask, the Railway Companies, without extending the railway system to the injury of any existing fishery interest, should enter into an obligation to serve the Islands with steamers from the existing rail-heads."

A boat infinitely superior either to the *Cygnets* or the *Plover* is required for the Barra route. No one who has travelled to Castlebay with a south-west wind blowing and the full might of the Atlantic sweeping toward Coll and Tiree would hesitate in urging the dire necessity for placing a swifter, stronger, and steadier boat on the Barra route.

The Celt and the Sea

That the present system leaves much to be desired needs no elaborate demonstration. When the mail-steamer does not arrive, perishable commodities, such as fish and cockles, are left lying on the pier at Castlebay, with the result that the anxious toil of the crofter and fisherman is wasted. In mitigation of West Highland steamer transport it may be said that the best part of Messrs. MacBrayne's service is the crews manning his antediluvian boats. The wonder to many of us is that these boats sometimes make port at all! The Celt has his shortcomings, God knows; but it is nonsense to say that he does not make a skilful mariner. If you entertain any doubts on this score, witness the *Cygnets* sneaking into Canna at 4 a.m. in winter, when the man standing by your side cannot make himself heard because of the storm. West Highland seamen have implicit trust even in the inferior vessels on which they sail. The story is told of an intending passenger who waited long after scheduled time for the arrival of a boat that was due to call on her way to Skye. When eventually the steamer came in sight, the passenger, unfamiliar with the idiosyncrasies of West Highland transport, turned to an old seaman standing on the pier and said :

“ Is that the Skye steamer ? ”

“ Aye,” replied the seaman, “ that’s the Skye steamer.”

“ What ? *That* boat will never get to Skye to-day ! ”

Indignant that a Sassenach should presume to cast such aspersion either on the seamanship of the Isles or on the capabilities of the Skye boat, the old seaman whisked his pipe out of his mouth, and retorted abruptly :

“ She’ll be in Skye the day, if nothin’ happens to Skye ! ”

.

In Blue Barra of the Ships every boy is born a sailor. The youngsters of Castlebay think nothing of going out alone with a lugsail. A small boy will cruise about the harbour all day long, dexterously manipulating sail and tiller with the utmost confidence. For centuries the men-folks of the Barra Isles have maintained an indifference to husbandry : they always have been seamen. From their ancestors they have inherited to a marked degree those qualities that in olden times made Barra famous for its sailors and notorious for its pirates.

NOTE : Since this chapter was written, radical improvements in West Highland and Hebridean sea transport are anticipated, following upon the passing of the *Western Highlands and Islands (Transport Services) Act, 1928*.

VI

THE DARK GLEN OF BARRA

AT THE CREELING OF THE PEATS

WITH the exception of a few islands like Vatersay and Tiree, the Isle of Barra possesses in its peat deposits that almost limitless source of combustible which for unnumbered centuries has compensated the Outer and Inner Hebrides for the lack of native timber and minerals. Tiree was denuded of its peat at an early date. That at the period during which the Columban Church predominated in Scotland the surface of Tiree had been fairly thoroughly "skinned" and cultivated may be imagined from its having been regarded as the granary of Iona.

To-day in Tiree a peat fire would be little short of a novelty. But for the fragments of driftwood cast upon its shores by storms, the inhabitants are accustomed to no other fuel than coal. In times gone by, when a number of smacks and small craft were owned locally, the natives of Tiree were in the habit of transporting cargoes of peat from Mull at regular intervals.

Coal in Puffers

Nowadays they are entirely dependent upon the little steam-puffers that call with coal at such maritime townships as Scarinish and Balemartine. Being flat-bottomed

and requiring no great draught, these puffers can unload at places where there are no piers. When the tide recedes, most of them sit upright on the sands without the aid of props. The arrival of a puffer at Tiree with a cargo of coal is notified a day or two beforehand ; and, when she is beached in the neighbourhood of Balemartine or Scarinish, great numbers of carts assemble on the shore at the ebb to convey coal from her to the surrounding districts. The writer has enumerated no fewer than twenty-five carts engaged simultaneously in unloading a puffer lying on the strand below Balemartine.

During the great coal strike of 1926 the inhabitants of Tiree found themselves particularly at a disadvantage owing to the want of indigenous fuel. Having exhausted their small supplies of coal, they were obliged to bring peats from the more favoured Isles. It was propitious for them that the greater part of the strike extended over the summer months. And not a few bags of peats were consigned from the Hebrides to the coal-less homes of relatives and friends in the cities during that same strike.

Peat-cutting in the Dark Glen

With the vicissitudes affecting the production and distribution of coal the majority of the natives of Barra has not been concerned. Situated among the hills that occupy the centre of their island, and create the water-parting for the streams and rills ultimately reaching the sea on the east and west, are the liberal peat deposits that have furnished them abundantly with a fuel that is clean and light, and that, as a rule, is won under agreeable circumstances. Although there is a certain amount of peat-

cutting on the slopes of Ben Tangval, and among the patches thereon that at a distance appear to comprise little but rocks and boulders, the principal source of fuel in Barra is Gleann Dorch, or the Dark Glen—thus named, no doubt, in respect of its jet-black peats which, when properly prepared and regulated, burn better and longer than would the same volume of coal.

Gleann Dorch runs between the Cora-bheinn and Ben Obe. In the vicinity of Loch na Nighinn Ruaidhe, the Loch of the Red-haired Maiden, it trends toward the centre of Barra, terminating gradually in a typical corrie somewhere in the region of Grianan and Hartaval.

Securing Winter Fuel

The greater part of the Dark Glen is traversed by a cart track departing from the main Barra road at Loch an Duin. Along this cart track in time of summer carts and creels and ponies, men and women and boys and girls of all ages, are passing to and fro the whole day long, conveying from the vast peat-hags to their respective townships the fuel that must needs serve them over the winter months that occupy so great a portion of the Hebridean year. The peat-moss extends to about half a mile on either side of the track ; and those who are not actively engaged in cutting and drying the peats, or in leading carts and pony-carried creels, find ample occupation in stacking them at points by the side of the track, from which they may be transported more conveniently than from the heart of the peat-moss.



GLIMPSE OF A CURING STATION AT CASTLE-
BAY, WITH HEAVAL IN THE BACKGROUND.

A Scene of Intense Activity

On a warm summer day I have counted as many as fifty ponies employed at the creeling of the peats in the Dark Glen of Barra, and in carting them to Greian, Cliat, Cuier, Allasdale, Bruernish, Balnabodach, and the several other crofting townships scattered throughout the Isle of Barra. Nowhere is the essentiality of the pony to everyday life in the West Highlands and Hebrides more fully demonstrated than it is in Gleann Dorch when the Barra crofters are taking advantage of a spell of fine weather to secure their winter fuel. On scanning the hillsides one sometimes is amazed to notice, perhaps a mile away, a couple of ponies with peat-filled creels being led by a small barefooted boy down the face of rocks on which the average town-dweller would feel positively squeamish.

Much working at the peats have I seen in different parts of my beloved Lewis, but seldom a picture of industry and activity more concentrated than the Dark Glen of Barra presents when the whole landscape, from the corrie in Hartaval right down to Loch na Nighinn Ruaidhe, is studded with carts and creels, peats and peat-stacks, ponies followed by timid foals, collies innumerable, and natives of all sizes and ages, ranging from small boys and girls of five and six to decrepit "cailleachs" and "bodachs" of more than three score years and ten.

A Whiff of Peat Reek

The stranger to the Isles, who in the summer-time is tempted to meander along the cart track leading across the

peaty moor to the heart of the Dark Glen, will find enough to "fill the unforgiving minute." If he arrive at the peat-moss about midday, he will smell the reek of many a peat fire kindled on the moor for the preparation of the simple meal ; and, if he be not over fastidious, he will accept the invitation of a crofter and his family to share with them their humble repast, even although the tea be black and heather-blent, and the oatcakes and *gruth* (crowdie) have a slight suggestion of peat reek about them.

VII

FESTIVAL OF FIRE

SMOORING THE PEATS

*Tha mis' a' smàladh an nochd an teine,
Mar a dheanadh Mac Mhuire.*

MANY a queer custom connected with fire is associated with Pagan and Christian Gaeldom. We are all more or less familiar, for example, with the rites that were observed on *Latha Bealltuinn* (Beltane), or May Day. In the Highlands and Islands it was customary at Beltane, the ancient festival of fire, to extinguish all domestic fires, and to rekindle them from the *teine-eibhinn*, or neid-fire, which was produced on some neighbouring knoll by fricative means. To such a hillock the natives conveyed twigs and faggots on Beltane's Eve, so that, whenever the "fire of heaven" was lit, they might continue to feed it.

Once kindled, the neid-fire was divided into two parts; whereupon the people in whose township the knoll was located hurried home for their cattle and sheep, that the same might be herded round and between the purifying fires of Beltane, and thus be rendered immune from all manner of evil during the succeeding year.

That the fires of Beltane usually were of no meagre dimensions is illustrated by the fact that to this day there are current in the Isles phrases, wherein men will refer to

the performance of a certain task as demanding of them more than would be required to induce them to pass through the May Day fires.

Pennant's Description of Beltane

From fragments of the neid-fire, lit on Beltane's Day, the folks attending the ceremony rekindled the fires, which annually they had extinguished in their own hearths. As recently as the end of the eighteenth century the custom of lighting the *teine-eibhinn*, or neid-fire, was prevalent all over Celtic Scotland.

On the subject of Beltane, Pennant delivered himself in 1769 as follows :

" On the first of May the herdsmen of every village hold their *Bel-tein*, a rural sacrifice. They cut a square trench on the ground, leaving the turf in the middle ; on that they make a fire of wood on which they dress a large caudle of eggs, butter, oatmeal, and milk ; and bring, besides the ingredients of the caudle, plenty of beer and whisky ; for each of the company must contribute something. The rites begin with spilling some of the caudle on the ground, by way of libation : on that every one takes a cake of oatmeal, upon which are raised nine square knobs, each dedicated to some particular being, the supposed preserver of their flocks and herds, or to some particular animal, the real destroyer of them : each person then turns his face to the fire, breaks off a knob, and flinging it over his shoulders, says, *This I give to thee, preserve thou my horses ; this to thee, preserve thou my sheep ;* and so on. After that they use the same ceremony to the noxious animals : *This I give to thee, O Fox ! Spare thou my*

lambs ; this to thee, O hooded Crow ! this to thee, O Eagle ! When the ceremony is over, they dine on the caudle ; and after the feast is finished, what is left is hid by two persons deputed for that purpose," etc.

Leaping Thrice through the Flames

That in the county of Perth the Beltane festival was still being observed at this time is borne out by several contemporary writers. The following passage from Sinclair's *Statistical Account of Scotland* (1794), dealing with the survival of peculiar customs in the Parish of Callander, may be taken as applicable to most Highland villages at the time :

" Upon the first day of May, which is called *Bel-tan*, or *Bâl-tein* day, all the boys in a township or hamlet meet in the moors. They cut a table in the green sod, of a round figure, by casting a trench in the ground, of such circumference as to hold the whole company. They kindle a fire, and dress a repast of eggs and milk in the consistence of a custard. They knead a cake of oatmeal, which is toasted at the embers against a stone. After the custard is eaten up they divide the cake into so many portions, as similar as possible to one another in size and shape as there are persons in the company. They daub one of these portions all over with charcoal until it be perfectly black. They put all the bits of the cake into a bonnet. Every one, blindfold, draws out a portion. He who holds the bonnet is entitled to the last bit. Whoever draws the black bit is the *devoted* person who is to be sacrificed to *Baal*, whose favour they mean to implore, in rendering the year productive of the sustenance of man

and beast. There is little doubt of these inhuman sacrifices having been once offered in this country, as well as in the east, although they now pass from the act of sacrificing and only compel the *devoted* person to leap three times through the flames ; with which the ceremonies of this festival are closed."

The Neid-fire in Uist

In North Uist the Beltane festival survived well into the nineteenth century. At Sollas, in the north-west of North Uist, those, who as late as 1829 (" the year of the yellow snow ") extinguished the fires in their homes, relit them from the neid-fire produced by the rapid boring of a hole in an oaken log with a sharp tool. The neid-fire obtained thus at Sollas from the *Sail Daraich*, or Oak Log, on such occasions was reputed to have been among the most propitious in all the Hebrides.

The extinguishing of fires and the rekindling from the neid-fire continued in the remote clachans of Ross and Sutherland until about 1830.

In the Notes to *Carmina Gadelica*, Alexander Carmichael records that, as late as 1895, a woman in Arran told him how, in the time of her father, the islanders, having kindled the neid-fire on a hillock, drove their " creatairean " (creatures) to the scene, in order that they might be protected against the evil doings of a notorious witch named Crawford.

Fire conveyed to the Shieling

In the same way as that in which the home fires were rekindled with burning fragments from the neid-fires at Beltane, the fires were kindled when the young women

left the township and arrived at their summer shielings. The lighting of the shieling fire was attended with much ceremony. The processional exit *bho baile gu beinn*—from the Roman Catholic township to the shielings among the hills—commenced with the coming of May—probably on the first Thursday of that month. On arrival at the shieling the fire was lit from a smouldering peat or two, conveyed all the way from the township ; and appropriate runes were intoned, invoking the protection and guidance of the Triune.

In addition to invoking the Trinity, the Romanists, on the arrival of the *triall*, or procession, at the shieling, called upon the names of various saints revered by the Celts.

Thursday was St. Columba's Day, and the day on which it was seemly to put the web in the warp, and the *curach* (coracle) on the sea, to send the beasts to the shieling, to hunt among the hilltops, to harness steeds, and to set eggs under a clocking hen. St. Columba was the guardian of the fold. Thursday was also the day on which to hoist sail and put out to the "treasury of Mary" (*Guilidh Mhoire*). The inhabitants of the Barra Isles spoke of the sea as the "treasury of Mary" in virtue of its being their most bountiful source of livelihood. On St. Columba's Day the seafarers of the Western Isles long ago used to offer libations of mead or gruel to the God of the Sea—the God whom the landfarers invoked "to put weed in the drawing wave," that therewith they might manure the soil.

Patron Saint of Horses and the Sea

St. Bride, the help-woman of Mary, was invoked among others. Into the intricate genealogy of this saint we need not enter here at the moment ; but be it remembered that

St. Bride occupies in Celtic lore and legend a prominence second to none. St. Michael of the flaming sword invariably was called upon, for, besides being the patron saint of horses, he is the patron saint of the sea and every thing pertinent to it. Boats, nets, fishing-tackle, oars, ropes, and sails were all dedicated to St. Michael.

Corresponding with St. Michael's Mount, situated off Cornwall, and Mont St. Michel, off the coast of Manche, and with kindred names associated with other Celtic sea-boards, are the Michaels of the more southerly of the Outer Hebrides. On the south side of the narrow entrance to Loch Eport, in North Uist, is a promontory called Rudha Mhic Gille-Mhìcheil. A headland on the west coast of South Uist is termed Rudh' Ard-Mhìcheil. Nearby is the old burying-ground known as Cladh Mhìcheil, whither, in the olden time, the Islanders made a pilgrimage, which concluded with the "oda" (*odaidh* : cf. Norse, *etja*, a horse-fight). At the "oda" were to be found athletes in friendly contest, and much festive merriment.

Ancient Hebridean Tournaments

The Island of Barra celebrated the "oda" on 25th September, which was the day of the patron saint, St. Barr. Elsewhere this tournament was held on the twenty-ninth day of the same month, that date being St. Michael's Day, since horse-racing formed an integral part of the "oda," and St. Michael was the patron saint of horses. In Barra the sandy stretch known as the Traigh Cille-Bharra, situated between Eoligarry and the Isle of Orosay, was the site on which the Barra folks held their "oda" or sports. The year 1829 witnessed the last "oda" in Barra.



A PUFFER UNLOADING A CARGO OF COAL ON THE FORESHORE AT
BALEMARTINE, ISLE OF TIRREE.



AT THE CREELING OF THE PEATS IN THE DARK GLEN OF BARRA.

By far the most important races held in the Outer Isles were the horse-races at the "oda" in South Uist. They were conducted on the *Traigh Mhicheil*, St. Michael's Strand.

In North Uist the Michaelmas horse-racing was practised on the Traigh Ear (Eastern Shore) at Udal, on the Traigh nam Faoghailean at Hougary, and on the Traigh Stir, near Hosta.

The last "oda" in South Uist was held in 1820. In Benbecula it survived until about 1830. The *Traigh Mhuire*, the Shore of Mary, in North Uist, witnessed an "oda" as late as 1866.

Until about 1819 the "oda" survived in the Harris, where it was associated with St. Clement. The beautiful, old Church of St. Clement, at Rodil, in the Harris, is one of the sweetest places in the whole of the Hebrides.

St. Michael's Cakes

During the "oda" festival cakes of barley-meal were provided. These cakes were known as "St. Michael's Cakes." They are referred to by Martin Martin, who witnessed a South Uist cavalcade riding along the sands. Martin writes: "The Papists observe all the festivals of their Church, they have a general cavalcade on All Saints' Day, and then they bake St. Michael's cake at night, and the family and strangers eat it at supper."

Martin also noted that at Michaelmas a cavalcade took place in the village of Kilbar, in Barra, after which it was customary to bake St. Michael's cake—"and all strangers, together with those of the family, must eat the bread that night."

On the eve of St. Michael's Day it was permissible in South Uist and in Barra to remove the horse belonging to

a neighbour, without being regarded as having committed theft. And so the owners of horses used to keep a sharp look-out to prevent their animals from being stolen. In respect of the latitude allowed to horse-stealers, St. Michael's Eve was termed *Feasgar faire nan Steud*—the Eve of the watching of the Horses.

"Lifting" the Fire

Among the most beautiful rites observed in the Hebrides were the "lifting" or rekindling of the fire at the waking hour, and the smoooring of it at the time of retiral for the night.

At daybreak the woman of the house would be stooping over her fire to gather the cinders. And she would breathe into the heart of the lifeless-like peats until a redness came upon them and a yellow flame. And, kneeling over her "lifting" or rekindling of the fire, she would utter an invocation, so that throughout the day her home, and every one and every thing pertaining unto her, might be immune from scathe, and from whatsoever was untoward.

The Smoooring of the Fire

And the smoooring of the fire (*smàladh* in Gaelic) was the old ceremony whereby, at nightfall, the live peats were smothered or subdued, so that throughout the night they might smoulder quietly.

In the days when the fire occupied the centre of the floor in the Hebridean home, this custom required the even distribution in a circle on the hearth of the dying embers, which then were divided into three sections. Between each section a fresh peat was placed, and in the name of each of the Trinity. And, when the peat fire was

smothered thus, and the hearth tidied for the night, the goodwife of the house, kneeling in silence by the fire with her eyes closed, would stretch her loving arms over her smooing, and intone the fragment of an old rune.

At times the subdued embers were placed in a *slochd*, or pit, in the earthen floor, and covered over with a flag until the "lifting" of the fire in the morning. As a rule, however, the smooing was carried out in accordance with the custom cited above.

As I told you in *Behold the Hebrides !*, in some parts of the Western Isles and of Ireland an ancient *beannachadh*, or blessing, still is repeated at the smooing of the peat fire, after the day's toiling is over, and when the soft night closes in around those who labour among the Hebrides, and in the lonely places of Old Erin.

Often it is blessing the fire the housewife would be ; and many a beautiful old rune would be murmured at the blessing of the fire. And here is a fragment that at Staonabrig (Stoneybridge), in South Uist, was intoned at the smooing of it :

The sacred Three
To save,
To shield,
To surround
The hearth,
The house,
The household,
This eve,
This night,
Oh ! this eve,
This night,
And every night,
Each single night.

Amen.

VIII

THE SEAL-FOLK

THEIR RÔLE IN FACT AND FICTION

THOUGH to-day the Seal-folk tradition is scarcely remembered in the Western Isles, there still remain a few old people who can engage your interest with legends of the Sliochd nan Ròn and their sleeky offspring. Moreover, we are fortunate in being able to refer to the researches of a handful of folklorists who were careful to commit to writing such odd fragments of traditionary lore concerning the Seal-folk as it was their lot to discover. Nevertheless, authentic information regarding the Clan of the Seal is scanty. This may be due partly to the fact that the legends associated with its members have come down to us from obscure times and from some remote places.

In the Hebrides it is believed that the seals were royal attendants in the palaces of Lochlann, in the Land of the King of Sleep, whence they came to our shores in the capacity of secret emissaries in the service of the Kings of Lochlann.

The Seal-folk in Ireland

Irish folklorists tell us that the families of Coneely, O'Flaherty, O'Sullivan, and Mac-na-mara are the direct descendants of the Seal-folk. According to a legend current in the west of Ireland, in ancient times some



A GROUP OF PEAT-GATHERERS IN THE DARK GLEN OF BARRA.

members of the Coneely family (one of the earliest septs in that country) were metamorphosed into seal-men and seal-women by "art magick"; and so no Coneely can slay a seal without incurring ill-fortune and the censure of his kinsfolk. A writer in the *Folklore Journal* mentions that, since seals are called Coneelys, many of this sept altered their surname to Conolly.

For the seal ancestry of the O'Flahertys one ought to consult Hardiman's notes to O'Flaherty's *Description of H-iar (West) Connaught*.

The inhabitants of Achill Island consider themselves the progeny of seals. The following quotation, taken from Otway's *Sketches of Erris*, defines the Irish attitude to seals: "At Erris, in Ireland, seals are considered to be human beings under enchantment, and they consider it unlucky to have anything to do with seals, and to have one live near their dwelling is considered as productive of evil to life and property. A story current in 1841 describes how a young fisherman came in a fog upon an island whereon lived these enchanted men in their human form, but when they quitted it they turned to seals again."

A Donegal Tradition

So deeply imbued with the seal tradition were the natives of Aranmore that within living recollection nothing would induce them to interfere with the activities of the seal. Quoting some years ago from a folklorist who had made several excursions into the Seal-folk tradition as prevalent in Donegal about the year 1875, a contributor to a Belfast journal wrote as follows: "Until lately the slanders of Aranmore could not be induced to attack a

seal, they being strongly under the impression that these animals were human beings metamorphosed by the power of their own witchcraft. In confirmation of this notion, they used to repeat the story of one Rodgers of their island, who, being alone in his skiff fishing, was overtaken by a storm and driven on the shore of the Scottish Highlands. Having landed, he approached a house which was close to the beach, and on entering it was accosted by name. Expressing his surprise at finding himself known in a strange country, and by one whom he had never seen, the old man who addressed him bared his head, and, pointing to a scar on his skull, reminded Rodgers of an encounter he had with a seal in one of the caves of Aranmore. 'I was,' he said, 'that seal, and this is the mark of the wound you inflicted on me. I do not blame you, however, for you were not aware of what you were doing.' "

MacCodrums of the Seals

The tradition of the Seal-folk as it existed in the Hebrides is alluded to by Sheriff Nicolson among his Gaelic Proverbs, where he makes mention of the race known as "the Children of MacCodrum of the Seals" (*Clann Mhic-Codruim nan Ròn*). The MacCodrums are a sept of the Clan Ranald. Nicolson cites the legend concerning the MacCodrums' having been metamorphosed into seals. But, although they changed their form, they still retained their human souls. The popular belief in North Uist was that the MacCodrums were seals by day and human beings by night. And, since the MacCodrums were conscious of their seal affinity, nothing would induce them to kill a seal or to molest or injure one in any way.

The natives of Aranmore refrained from interfering with seals merely because they regarded them as transmuted human beings: the MacCodrums, on the other hand, showed deference to seals not just because they believed them to be of human origin, but because they believed them to be of their very own kith and kin.

"A Voice of Supernatural Beauty"

The Rev. Archibald MacDonald, who in 1894 collected the poems and songs of John MacCodrum, the bard, inclines to derive the regard in which seals were held from their large, soft, blue eyes, and from the appeal of their semi-human expression. "Hence on one occasion," writes MacDonald, "a hunter aiming at a seal with his gun or bow heard the creature begin to sing, in a voice of supernatural beauty, a song lamenting the loss of her dear ones." MacDonald also remarks that it was said a woman of the surname of MacCodrum, and probably of the bard's lineage, "used to be seized with violent pains at the time of the annual seal hunt, out of sympathy, it was supposed, with her suffering relatives."

There are many in the Isles who predicate that they have heard seals singing. At a recent ceilidh in Assynt House, Stornoway, MacFarquhar, the miller at Dell, in the Lewis, entertained my friend, Iain MacGhille Mhuire, and myself with a sensational account of how, when nearing North Rona, on which he has a number of sheep, the seals always greet him with music. And it's MacFarquhar who, without the slightest provocation, will be imitating the seals when they are behaving "like a great Gaelic congregation singing psalms."

Iogan and his Host

The story of how Rodgers, the Aranmore islander, was addressed by a man who, when in the form of a metamorphosed seal, had been wounded by him in an encounter, has a parallel in Uist. The incident is related at length in *Carmina Gadelica*. While an Uist crew was engaged in hand-line fishing off the shores of Cousamul, there arose a great tempest that drove it into a fiord—well, some say in Lewis, and others say in Tiree. At any rate, the unfortunate fishers were kindly received and hospitably entertained in a croft hard by the shore on which they had been driven. In deference to an old Celtic custom, the host was never given, nor indeed did he ask, the names of such guests as happened to be complete strangers to him, until they were about to depart. The host on this occasion was “a big grizzly-bearded man, whose face, hands, and feet were full of scars and mended bones.” And when he learned whence his guests had come, and that the spokesman among them was named Iogan (possibly a diminutive of Iain), he drew attention to his scars and mended bones and addressed Iogan in the Gaelic, and in the following terms :

“ Iogain ! Iogain ! Iogain !
Iogain who came hither
On the crest of the nine fifty waves,
Thou man who did'st break the teeth of my head,
Roused am I to see thee with me,
Iogain ! Iogain ! Iogain !
Though I gave thee food,
Butter and cheese and flesh,
By thy two hands, Iogain,
'Twas thou drove the dart through my paw.”

The grizzly-bearded host was none other than he who, as a metamorphosed seal, had been visiting his oceanic kindred off the Isle of Cousamul, when Iogan and his men made a raid on the seals and slew many of their number.

And Iogan was petrified with fear and remorse ; and he vowed that never again would he or any member of his crew molest a seal.

Annual Seal-hunting Expeditions

That by the other inhabitants of North Uist the seal was not held in such reverence as it was by the Mac-Codrums is attested by the painful account given by Martin Martin of the annual expeditions to the islands and skerries off the coast of the Uists—particularly to Cousamul and Haskeir—for the sole purpose of killing seals. This excursion is commented upon in the *New Statistical Account* (1845), where it is stated that in the proper season and under specified regulations a boat was dispatched to each skerry, the crew having been furnished with large clubs “ which they use dexterously.” The seals were then divided according to ancient rule, and with scarcely a murmur of dispute. The proprietor of the skerries was entitled to four seals and the parish minister to one.

The yearly destruction of seals on Haskeir was a very old practice. Writing in 1594 (the year in which he travelled through most of the Hebrides), Donald Monro, High Dean of the Isles, refers to “ ane ile callit Haysker, quherin infinit slaughter of selchis is.”

The Excursion to Cousamul

The report of Captain John Dymes would seem to indicate that in olden times even the inhabitants of Lewis joined in the annual trip to Cousamul in order to participate in the slaughter of seals there. Dymes, as you may be aware, was commissioned in 1630 by certain members of the Privy Council to proceed to Lewis with a view to preparing a report on that Island in connection with the great fishing schemes inaugurated by Charles I. The instructions issued to him were embodied in an Act of Parliament defining Lewis as "the most proper seate for a continuall fishing" and as "adherent to our Crowne," and favouring the establishing of a market for traffic, and the creation of one or more "free burrowes" in such parts of the Island as might be suitable, from a topographical point of view, for the erection of magazines and fishing stages.

Captain Dymes's Evidence

Although compiled with especial reference to the fishing possibilities of the Long Island, Dymes also embraces in his report valuable observations on such topics as climate, topographical features, land tenure, agrestic usages, products, customs, superstitions, religion, and fauna. This report was discovered some years ago in the British Museum. It contains the undernoted paragraph anent the slaying of seals on Cousamul :

"They have alsoe a yearely fishinge vpon a small Ile called Causmoun where they kill great store of Seales w^{ch} fishinge may rather bee called an huntinge then a fishinge, for the inhabitants

repaire thither once in the yeare manie of them togeather well arm'd both for offence and defence where they find theis fish vpon the Rocks, the weapons wherewith they kill them, are great batts and swords, and to defend themselves ag^t the teeth of theis fish (whose nature is not to lett goe theire hold till they feele the bones bruise between theare teeth) they lyne their Trooses wth Charcoales, soe that when those fish chance to bite anie of them, when they feel the coales crash within their teeth they give over their hold and are sooner overcome, this fish alsoe they make meate of as they doe by their Whales . . .”

These gruesome details are corroborated by the following extract occurring in “Ane Descriptione of Certaine Pairts of the Highlands of Scotland,” believed to have been compiled about the same time (?1630) as was the report of Captain Dymes :

“And the Inhabitants of the Countrey (North Uist in this instance) doe meet and gather themselves togidder once in the yeare upon ane certain tyme in faire and good weather and bring bigg trees and stafs in ther hands with them as weapons to kill the selchis which doeth Innumerable conveen and gather to that Illand at that tyme of the yeare. And so the men and the selchis doe fight stronglie And there will be Innumerable selchis slaine wherwith they loaden ther boatts, which causes manie of them oftymes perish and droune in respect that they loaden ther boatts with so manie selchis.”

William Sharp and the Seal-man

The tradition of the MacCodrums forms the theme of Fiona MacLeod's *Dàn-nan-Ròn*, a tale in which the principal part is played by one Manus MacCodrum. Though the story concludes in a rather fantastic and imaginary manner, it commences by giving a fair conception of the tradition of the Seal-folk as handed down from father to son in the

Outer Hebrides. It ends dramatically with the plunging of Manus MacCodrum into the sea, hailing the seals as his blood kindred. Manus MacCodrum, Sharp tells us, "was a fine lad to see, but though most of the fisherfolk of the Lewis and North Uist are fair, either with reddish hair and grey eyes or blue-eyed and yellow-haired, he was of a brown skin with dark hair and dusky brown eyes. He was, however, as unlike to the dark Celts of Arran and the Inner Hebrides as to the Northmen. He came of his people sure enough. All the MacCodrums of North Uist had been brown-skinned and brown-haired and brown-eyed ; and herein may have lain the reason why, in bygone days, this small clan of Uist was known throughout the Western Isles as the Sliochd nan Ròn, the offspring of the Seals."

Sharp again uses the Seal-folk legend in his "Rune of Manus MacCodrum"—

"It is I, Manus MacCodrum,
I am telling you that, you, Anndra of my blood,
And you, Neil my grandfather, and you, and you, and you !
Ay, ay, Manus my name is, Manus MacManus !
It is I myself and no other,
Your brother, O Seals of the Sea !"

Last Bard to the Lords of the Isles

Iain MacCodrum, the North Uist Bard mentioned earlier, was a contemporary of Prince Charlie (1710-96). He was interred in the moss-covered mools at Hougary. He is regarded as having been the last bard to the Lords of the Isles, an office to which he was appointed about 1763. You may recall that Iain MacCodrum was among

those who insisted on the genuineness of MacPherson's "Ossian."

Some authorities on the Norse influence on Celtic Scotland are of opinion that the surname, MacCodrum, is of Norse extraction, and is equivalent to the Norse word, *Guttormr*, denoting "god-serpent."

A Colonsay Legend

It was an ancient belief among the Celts that drowned persons took the form of seal-men and seal-women, and that periodically they were allowed to dispense with their seal skins and assume human form during the night-time, and to return to the sea as seals at sunrise. Legend has it that the MacPhees of Colonsay are of the stock of a seal-woman whose seal skin was discovered on a rock one day, and removed to a house near at hand by a thoughtless islander. However, the mermaiden was not for resting until she recovered the seal skin of which she had been deprived, whereafter she plunged into the sea again.

The Seal-folk Tradition in Shetland

That the Seal-folk tradition is not unknown in Shetland is illustrated by the ballad collected there by Lieut. Thomas, R.N., and communicated by him to the Society of Antiquaries in 1852. The ballad was obtained from the dictation of a venerable "lady-udaller" (a proprietrix) who resided at Suarra Voe, a secluded district of Shetland. Thomas tells us that "the story is founded on the superstition of the Seals or Selkies being able to throw off their waterproof jackets and assume the more graceful

proportions of the genus Homo.” He informs us further that Silky is a common name in the north country for a seal—a word which appears to be a corruption of the Norse word, *selch*. Sule Skerry, a rocky islet twenty-five miles to the westward of Hoy Head, in Orkney, still is the resort of seals. The ballad is entitled *The Great Silkie of Sule Skerry*, and its third verse runs as follows :

“ I am a man upo’ the lan’
 An’ I am a Silkie in the sea ;
 An’ when I’m far and far frae lan’,
 My dwelling is in Sule Skerrie.”

The manner in which the Silkies could transform themselves into human beings is referred to both in Barry’s *History of Orkney* and in Hibbert’s *History of Shetland*.

The Trows of the Northern Isles

A Northern Isles tradition asserts that even the trows sometimes changed themselves into seals—especially the land-trows, who were oftener in need of such metamorphosis than were the sea-trows. When searching for a human wife, the land-trows frequently took the form of seals, if obliged to cross from one island to another.

In his volume entitled *Our Highland Folklore Heritage*, Alexander Polson recites the story of an old Shetlander who, when shipwrecked on an island some considerable distance from his own, entered a house, the interior arrangements of which were strangely reminiscent of his home. Not a little startled was he when, in the person of the goodwife, he recognised a sister who, some years previously, had disappeared mysteriously from her home. Realising

that he had come to the house of a trow, he was anxious to depart, lest anything untoward should befall him ; but his sister pressed him to wait a whilie, and to accept such hospitality as she could offer. Nor was he seated long when a large seal came in, crossed in front of him, entered the ben of the house, and returned a moment or two later in the guise of a pleasant, well-favoured man, who made him doubly welcome on his sister's account.

The Orcadians will tell you that trows frequently foist themselves on innocent bachelors who may be thinking of matrimony ; and Orcadian mothers, when cross with their children, often use the phrase, " Trow tak' thee ! "

On resolving to go ashore on one of the Northern Isles in search of a human spouse, a lady trow immediately forfeits her seal skin ; but if in after years she should chance to come upon her discarded garment, she will be tempted to get into it again, even at the cost of deserting her husband and children for ever.

Seal-folk and Finn-folk

There are several points of similarity between the Seal-folk of the Hebrides and the mermen and mermaids of the north of Scotland. For example, both tribes are regarded as human wearers of seal skins ; and both are somewhat vaguely associated with the Finns, who are distinguished by the seal-skin appearance of their clothing. There once dwelt among the sea-tangled caverns of the north-west coast of Scotland a people called the Children of the Mermaid (*Sliochd na Maighdinn Chuain*). In Sutherland local tradition urges that the Children of the Mermaid were the offspring of a fisherman by a mermaid

who, having divested herself of the fish-tail-shaped seal skin covering the lower part of her body, made it possible for her admirer to capture her and take her to his home. But one day, while the Children of the Mermaid were playing in the barn, they chanced to find among the rafters a seal skin with a fish-like tail. This they straightway brought to their mother, who recognised in it her long lost sea coat. And their mother donned the seal skin before their very eyes ; and, without even bidding them farewell, she hastened off to her watery home.

Never again was the mermaid seen on the shores of Sutherland, nor heard tell of ; but the neighbours declared that, thereafter, her progeny derived from the sea richer and fuller harvests.

The lore of the Scandinavian archipelagoes is rich in allusions to a curious race known as the Finn-folk. These elusive creatures are said to be akin to the users of kayaks. Like the Eskimos they are described as spending most of their time in paddling through the narrow fiords in light canoes covered over with seal skins.

The fact that during the seventeenth century Orcadian waters were occasionally visited by Finns, who paddled about them in kayaks, is borne out by at least three contemporary annotators. The account of the Rev. John Brand, who in the year 1700 was delegated by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland to inquire into the religious state of the people of Orkney and Shetland, shows clearly that the solitary paddler in a seal-skin-covered skiff was no unusual visitor to those Islands. In the aforementioned year a Finn-man's canoe hung in the Church of Burray. What happened to the canoe when that church was destroyed by fire is unknown.

Driven into the Don

About this time Dr. James Wallace (son of the minister of Kirkwall who died in 1688) "caught in Orkney" another specimen of a kayak, along with its owner. This kayak was sent to Edinburgh. An entry made in the minute book of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh in September 1696 shows that "the shirt of the barbarous man that was in the boat," together with his canoe, paddle, and harpoon, had been bequeathed to Edinburgh University.

Of the origin of the kayak to be seen in the Anthropological Museum of Marischal College, Aberdeen, two accounts are given. According to a chronicler who refers to it in 1760, this kayak was driven into the mouth of the Don about the year 1728. In it was a hairy man, speaking a tongue unintelligible to the natives. "He lived but three days, though all possible care was taken to recover him." Another account of this incident, published about twenty years later (1782 to be exact), refers to the skiff as "a canoe taken from the Sea with an Indian man in it, about the beginning of this century." From this source we learn further that the occupant of the skiff "could give no account of himself," wherefore he was removed to Aberdeen. There he expired shortly after his arrival.

Paddling about in Kayaks

As was demonstrated by my late friend, David MacRitchie, the occupant of an Eskimo kayak, when seen afar off, would appear to be sitting on the surface of the water,

or half immersed in it. And this, doubtless, explains how these nimble canoe-men frequently have been taken for marine mammals of the seal order.

It will not be difficult to imagine how, in the process of time, the popular belief in the Seal-folk gained currency in the north and west when we remember that as late as the early years of the eighteenth century the channels of the Orcades and of the Hebrides were visited by strange little men who paddled about in kayaks, and at a distance resembled seals, and who—as both ethnology and tradition testify—became absorbed by the native population of the Isles of northern and western Scotland.

Kayakers in Greenland

The following quotation may suffice to illustrate the impression made by the approach of Eskimos from the seaward upon a party of Americans visiting the coast of Greenland :

“ At one time, while in camp at Ikamiut, when the wind was blowing a gale, shutting us up all day in our tent and tossing the waves of the fiord into such commotion that it would have been madness for any large boat to have ventured upon the water, we were thrilled by the cry that some kayakers were coming. They were three that belonged to the little settlement, and had come that day as a matter of course from Sukkertoppen, which was twenty miles distant. Upon reaching the shore and pulling themselves loose from their shells (canoes), the kayakers ran their hands into the apertures from which they had drawn their limbs, and brought out various objects of merchandise which they had purchased at the store for

their families. Then they severally took up their kayaks and carried them to a secure place, and disappeared in the igloos (huts of earth and stones), where their families soon joined them to talk over the adventures of the week. To us they seemed like inhabitants of the sea, who were accustomed to shed their skins on coming out of the water."

From the Courts of the King of Sleep

But of the Hebridean Seal-folk—and of the MacCodrums in particular—I like to believe that long, long ago they were vassals in the royal Palaces of Lochlann, and that they came to our Isles as secret delegates from the Courts of the King of Sleep.

The Clan MacCodrum of the Seals (*Clann 'Ic Codrum nan Ròn*) are, indeed, the Children of the Scandinavian King—under enchantment.

In the Hebrides the coming of seals inshore, and within speaking distance of human habitations, is held to prognosticate broken weather. From personal observation the writer can vouch that the presence of seals around the shores of Castle Bay and Loch Kentangval invariably is followed by a climatic change for the worse. Comparatively sheltered as is Castle Bay and the rock on which Kisimul Castle stands, its pirate chiefs must have slept through many a tempest when the Isle of Barra constituted the nucleus of their sovereignty. The equinoctial gales have a free hand in Barra when there's an angry mood on them. Their visit is foreshadowed also by the strange behaviour of seabirds. When a storm is imminent, great flocks of gulls may be seen huddling closely together on the roofs of the houses down by the shore, or on the battlements

of Kisimul. And it's seldom that in Barra wild weather is not preceded by a visit from a group of seals—those sleeky emissaries out of the Palaces of the Kings of Lochlann, in the Land of Sleep—slithering noiselessly, yet rhythmically, around the Castle, and within a few feet of its base.

Having told you much of the loveliness of the seal, it may not seem inappropriate at this juncture to append a few words with a view to bringing to the knowledge of the general reader the appalling agonies inflicted on this creature by those who torture him for his skin. In our own day so little is the deference paid to the seal that now he is almost unknown in certain waters where, formerly, he was innumerable. For my own part, I cannot think of this silken-eyed creature, nor behold a sealskin garment, without being reminded of the horror that the best seal-skin is obtained through skinning the *live* seal. This statement is no mere hallucination. The truth of the following sentence, extracted from an article contributed some time ago to the *Century Magazine* by an eye-witness, has been corroborated by Dr. Gordon Stables, R.N. :

“ In the utmost agony the wretched beast draws its muscles away from the sharp steel, which tears away its skin, and thus it assists in parting with its coat.”

The seals are raided in the breeding season, when thousands of them—mostly mothers—are caught and done to death in the manner indicated. Meanwhile, the hunger-stricken baby seals, too weak and inexperienced to take care of themselves, are left to starve on the Arctic snows, whereon they perish after the lapse of from two to three weeks.



SUNSHINE AND SUMMER AT LUSKENTYRE.

The maternal affection of the mother seal is alluded to by Dr. Gordon Stables in the following passage :

“ Their affection for their young is more than ordinary. When they hear the wailing of their babies on the snow, as they are being ruthlessly murdered by the clubbers, the distracted mothers come up and commence waddling towards them. They are, of course, immediately killed.”

Furriers and kindred dictators of absurd fashions have been telling us recently that “ the seal is coming into its own again.” Let us see to it that it *does* come into its own again, but in an entirely different sense. We can do something toward achieving this end by broadcasting the horror just described. Low as sometimes falls my estimate of the human species, I still have left enough faith in the sanity of enlightened public opinion to believe that, were it genuinely aware of the manner in which sealskins are procured, sealskin garments would be tabooed, and the wearers of them anathematised. Few women, I think, would insist on being fashionable and “ dressy ” at the expense of the defenceless seal, were the real facts presented to them.

The only effective means of terminating the agonies borne by many creatures, that are hunted, baited, and trapped for their coats, is to publish far and wide the revolting barbarities to which they are subjected, and to renounce those articles of dress that have been procured at such a cost. I consider these the solemn duties of every citizen possessing a grain of human pity and decency. But, then, those newspapers, which are in the habit of receiving considerable sums from the advertisers of furs, seldom give much assistance in a campaign of this nature. The advertisers control the press.

One wishes it were possible to say that the seal is the only animal, trapped for his coat, that suffers untold cruelty at the hands of man, the arch-brute. The public still has to realise how such artificialities as the furs of carnivora and Persian lamb are obtained.

IX

ISLAND SEA-WAYS

A LUGSAIL IN THE HEBRIDES

WHEN the short, dreich days and long, monotonous nights of winter have given place to sunshine and shower and the lengthening twilights of a burgeoning springtide, one feels the time has come for the boat to be taking the water again, and for oars and mast and canvas to be removed from their customary place of hibernation among the cobwebbed rafters of some old shed.

And what of the rowlocks and the tiller? They, too, must be brought to light once more, for he who has the sea pulsating through his veins cannot be answering its call without them.

Sea-ways of Skye

When the lugsail has received a fresh coating of paint, and has undergone the tinkerings compatible with safety and tidiness, the lad who puts out to sea with her from a fiord of the Western Isles has the choice of many waters. Wonderful cruises may be made with a lugsail by one knowing the rudiments of navigation, and not lacking in self-confidence. If you be in Skye, you may sail her over the Western Pool (*Linne 'n Iar*) from Portree to Acarsaid Thioram (Dry Harbour) in Rona, Isle of the Seal, or you

may tack out of Sligachan, the Place of Shells, and shoot northward through the Narrows of Raasay before wind and tide.

Skye offers many sea-ways to him who elects to spend his summer vacation with a lugsail ; but for my own part I prefer to be spreading canvas among the Outer Isles, anywhere between Barra Head and the Butt of Lewis.

Sea-ways of the Lewis

Sail about the labyrinthine sounds of Uig and Bernera and Loch Roag in midsummer, if it be your delight to dream in a part of the world where time is non-existent, and where the generations rise and pass away into nothingness before the face of Eternity. And, should you be sailing southward from Breascleit, the "False Men of Callernish" will nod to you, and tempt you to glide into some creek within range of their spell. Mellowed by the sunshine and storm of unrecorded centuries are the "False Men." Yet, there they stand, sentinel-like and aloof, heedless of time and the meaningless conventionalities of mankind. Long, indeed, is it since the "False Men" committed their mystery to the dim, unremembered past.

Beautiful is Loch Roag when twilight steals across the great Lewisian moors, and land and sea and sky are in communion with the Holy Spirit : beautiful is Loch Roag when its surface is all astir, when the big rains are dimpling the face of the bonnie blue lochs among the hills, and the wind comes whistling o'er the moor : beautiful, also, is Loch Roag when, from a lugsail on an early summer morning, one discerns the faint outline of Dun Carloway,



THE POETRY OF SAIL AND SEAWRACK, WIND AND TIDE
—THE AUTHOR BECALMED WITH A LUGSAIL IN LOCH
KENTANGVAL, ISLE OF BARRA.

and all the land is fresh and sweet-scented as with rain that falleth in the night.

Loch Carloway and the Dark

It is from Breascleit, on Loch Roag, that the reliefs of lighthousemen on the Seven Hunters are effected. And many a wild sea, sweeping into Loch Roag, has interrupted communication with this lone outpost, more than twenty miles out on the Atlantic Shelf. In olden times the inhabitants of Lewis made regular excursions to the Seven Hunters: to-day seldom does an unofficial boat venture near these storm-swept Isles. So, too, with North Rona, situated twice as far north of the Butt of Lewis as the Seven Hunters are west of it. North Rona still is visited annually from Lewis, when a boat leaves Ness in June or July, chiefly for the purpose of attending to the sheep pastured upon it.

But one of the loveliest lochs for a lugsail on the west coast of Lewis is Loch Carloway, where at night the incoming mariner is guided to safe anchorage by a lamp that is trimmed at sundown, and burns on the "Dùnan" till dawn. I have sneaked into Loch Carloway with a lugsail on the stilliest night, and have waited so long for a passing whiff of wind to clasp the empty canvas that, in the long run, the silence had to be broken by a rhythmic plashing of oars, and a ripple of phosphorescent water under the bow. And the light drip of the suspended oar upon Loch Carloway would be recalling Byron's lines on Lake Lemán at the hush of night.

Stream of the Blue Men

And now I want you to imagine yourself alone with a lugsail on the east side of the Outer Isles. If you be navigating anywhere in the neighbourhood of the Shiant Isles, every ounce of skill and determination will be required to resist the lure of the Blue Men of the Minch. Except for an odd tramp-steamer, dipping deep with heavy cargo, and astutely eschewing the perilous Stream of the Blue Men, you will have this formidable sea-way all to yourself. No one will come to your aid if you commit an error of judgment in the vicinity of the Shiants. The navigator must needs fight it out single-handed with the Blue Men, who, mounted on snowy steeds, will ride over him in derision, should he slip unwarily into their meshes.

But consider how beautiful they are in spite of their cruel and destructive activities—those Blue Men mounted on white chargers, galloping up and down in their own waterway! And who durst taunt them when the mood of anger is on the Minch? Never do these wily horsemen tire of reconnoitring where, with impunity, the tempests of æons have wreaked their vengeance on a shoreless land. Here the great Lewisian rocks are iron-proof against the assault of time, and immune to the ravages of tide. And yet who would gainsay that, millions of years before the advent of man, these very rocks once may have known “the stillness of the central sea,” or the sweltering lifelessness of some vast, arid continent?

Sea-ways of the Harris

Harris, too, offers an abundant variety of sea-ways to him who, from time to time, finds solace in going down "to the lonely sea and the sky" in a small boat. Ride into East Loch Tarbert on the crest of the storm when Scotasay and the Isle of the Geese are enveloped in mist and spume, and the torrents are loud in their singing among the eternal hills. Or, if you would hearken to the music of the sea, and study the *faux bourdon* extemporisations of the churning tide, traverse part of the Sound of Harris with shortened sail when the billows are leaping past Ensay and Killegray and Berneray, and riding by the Carminish Isles like successive lines of cavalrymen in panoply of white.

Eerie and death-dealing are the horsemen of the Sound of Harris when the Ninth Wave calls; and, should you be desirous of hearing the quaint language spoken by the sept of the Clan MacAndy that was transformed into wedge-tailed widgeons, manœuvre off the Isle of Berneray.

Lure of the Land-under-Waves

But it's the west of the Harris that will be putting the love on me when I find myself there with a lugsail. The west-going road of North Harris takes one nearer to Tìrnan-Og than any road in the world. And fain would the deft-handed dreamer among the Isles steer his craft toward Scarpa as a crepusculous stillness is overtaking the westering sun, or as dawn is silvering into day, and the first birds are dipping their breasts into the roseate hues of morning.

Let your boat drift about the dulse-sprent rocks of western Harris, and you will discover that she is being wafted away and away in the wake of the Great Grail Birlinn—for the Land-under-Waves aye lures those whose kindred, after terrestrial death, lives on “where pearls lie deep.”

At Scarpa the sun pronounces an inimitable blessing at his setting. And, while he is sifting down into the liquid gold of his own creation, you become weirdly conscious that nothing exists between him and you, and you and him, but the lengthless bond of Infinity and the measureless width of Eternity.

Son of the Wolf

Oh! let us return to the Lewis for a moment, so long as I remember to tell you about a lugsail experience on the sea-loch known as Loch Erisort. I have crossed this Loch with a lugsail on innumerable occasions; but not until last autumn did I properly appreciate its charm. I had been told in Stornoway that one Domhnall Mac a' Mhathain, Donald, Son of the Wolf, was now headmaster of the school at Kershader, on the south side of the Loch. Much had happened since Son of the Wolf sat behind me in the Moral Philosophy classroom and, greatly to the distraction of the late Professor Seth (not to allude to my own personal discomfort!), used to amuse himself by sticking an odd pin into me at the crucial point in the lecture, or by dropping some foul matter down my neck!

During intervening years Son of the Wolf and I had lost sight of one another. Wherefore last year I resolved to cycle over to Lochs and make an endeavour to reach Kershader by the hardly completed road travelling above

the southern shore of Loch Erisort towards Gearraidh a' Bhaird. Having arrived at Kershader after much physical exertion, I unearthed Son of the Wolf, and was relieved on being assured by him that at nightfall he would put me and my bicycle over the Loch in his lugsail, and thus reduce my return journey to Stornoway by at least ten of its worst miles. Time wore on in vagarious talking and in sipping tea ; and toward evening Son of the Wolf led me to a wee creek below the schoolhouse. There lay his boat, ready for whomsoever would be requiring her to bear him across to Valtos or Laxay, on the north side of Loch Erisort.

Think of it ! Here was Son of the Wolf owning not only a boat but also a wee, private creek in a world by the wayside of the universe !

Loch Erisort and the Drooping Night

As the late sunset was filtering through the autumned heather and making the moist dulse glitter like spangles of crimson and magenta, we repaired to Domhnall Mac a' Mhathain's boat. Our sail across Loch Erisort stands out among the memorable pictures in my vision—a perfect calm ; the sun going down behind the Forest of Morsgail like a ball of orange ; an almost windless canvas ; a gentle ripple at the cutting-line ; the salmon that, near the mouth of the River Laxay, were tearing the still surface of the Loch with their fins ; moveless images of hill and islet in the shadowy water ; a flock of wild-fowl winging northward through ethereal spacelessness, like specks without dimension ; the two graceful-necked Daughters of the Twelve Moons, who paddled silently into the bosom of a cavernous shore ; the abiding silence hanging over my

Lewis at the fall of the year and the close of an autumn day ; and the far-away look that at times would be in the eyes of Domhnall Mac a' Mhathain, as though he were " under enchantment."

With the seven spells of love, friendship, and sincerity on me, Son of the Wolf committed me to the long road for Stornoway. Thereafter he returned to his boat, and meandered back through the drooping night to his own private creek below Kershader.

Trembled the autumn twilight with a host of things sensed but invisible, as I sped home across the vast Lochs moor. And, ere I reached as far as Soval, the night-hag was hooting and screeching among the darkling peat-mosses. Soon the Merry Dancers were abroad upon the sky : soon lay the earth " all Danaë to the stars."

Among the Barra Isles

And now for a flying visit to the sea-ways of the Barra Isles, for I feel the tide is at the turning and the wind is fair for Castlebay. It is about the Barra Isles that he, who cruises with a lugsail, may make the acquaintance of the velvety children of MacCodrum of the Seals, who dwelt in North Uist before they were metamorphosed. Soft as leverets, and as shy, are the wistful-eyed seals that glide about the Isle of Barra ; and you would love to converse with them in their own tongue as they are putting their breasts to the tide, or basking on the sgeirs with the noon-day sun scintillating upon their silken sleekiness. Far have the children of MacCodrum of the Seals followed in my wake, when I have been sailing leisurely among the Barra Isles.

He who is familiar with the north-east of Barra will find about North Bay and the Oitir Mhór not a few delightful sea-ways for his lugsail musings, if the weather be dependable. The Islands of Fuday and Orosay are full of secret coves into which one may guide a small boat. There the dreamer may dream all day long while the soft wind is breathing through the scented grass, making melody like a César Franck pastorale. And, should the mariner be skilled in the handling of his craft, he may even venture across the Sound of Barra to the Isle of Eriskay. There the old folks will entertain him with stories of "the lad that's born to be king."

The Patter of Oread Feet

Sail over to Vatersay Bay at sunset in the late autumn when Nature's deft fingers are weaving upon the welkin webs of gold and orange and crimson, and when, between the sea and the sheen-white sands and mottled pebbles, the receding tide is describing a margin of glittering wetness.

But, haply, you would prefer to be drifting around Kisimul Castle with a windless sail on a calm, sunny noon. Then you may peer down "full fathom five" into the water to see the jewels of ocean lying, unclaimed, on the sandy patches of the sea's floor; and perhaps you will observe the discarded shell of the sea-urchin, which the small boys of Castlebay delight to fish up from the stern of a boat with an oar, or a piece of wire turned up at the end.

Given my choice, I would be afloat somewhere in the vicinity of Kisimul when Muldoanich is etched against the

silver of the rising moon, and the lad with the lugsail hears the patter of oread feet upon the sable night.

There the soothing balm of the night-tide is sweeter far than the kisses of women, and more fragrant than the roses of many gardens.



LOCH CARLOWAY AND THE "DÙNAN," ON THE WEST OF LEWIS.

X

ISLE OF THE DEER

THE PROPHECY OF MAC A' CHREACHAIN

NAVIGATORS tell us that to the south-east of the Isle of Barra there are more dangerous sgeirs and rocky islets than on any other part of the east side of the Hebrides. Not the least prominent feature of this coast is Muldoanich, an island roughly three-quarters of a mile in length, reaching an altitude exceeding five hundred feet above sea-level, and bold to all round except on the north-west.

Although in no way to be compared with the gigantic mural cliffs of Mingulay and Berneray, the rock faces of Muldoanich are steep and cavernous, falling precipitously to the sea.

Stated more precisely, Muldoanich is located some two leagues off the entrances to Vatersay and Castle Bays. Between it and Uinessan and the Uidh of Vatersay lies the ridge of bare, black, rugged rocks known to mariners as the Tooth Rocks.

MacNeil's Deer-forest

According to one tradition current in the Isle of Barra, Muldoanich received its name from an anchorite named Maoldomhnuich, who dwelt upon it, and whose ruined cell is still to be seen. In Gaelic *maol* means bald, and *Domhnach* means the Sabbath. Translated literally, Mul-

doanich, therefore, might be rendered as "the tonsured one of the Lord's Day." Many personal names connected with the old Celtic Church in the Highlands and Islands are prefixed by the word, *maol*—as, for example, Maolcalum, the tonsured of Malcolm or Columba, and Maolciaran, the shaven of Ciaran. It has been suggested that the Malise of Sir Walter Scott's *Lady of the Lake* is merely a corruption of Maoliosa, meaning the tonsured of Jesus.

In ancient times the Island of Muldoanich went by the name of *Eilean nam Fiadh*, Isle of the Deer, since it was here that MacNeil of Barra preserved a great herd of deer to provide sport and venison for such distant friends and kinsfolk as visited him from time to time at Kisimul Castle. Toward the close of the seventeenth century, Muldoanich was the only recognised deer-forest in this locality. At that period the herd was estimated at between seventy and eighty deer.

Beloved of the People

Of the hermit who afterwards gave his name to the Isle of the Deer we know very little. The seannachie in Barra will tell you that, about the time of the Reformation, there came to the Island a young Redemptionist priest, who was much beloved of the people. So eager, indeed, were the folks of the Barra Isles to retain his services as their parish priest that, on the expiry of his period of residence at Castlebay, they pleaded with the bishop of the Highland and Island districts not to take him from them, but to make his appointment permanent—so much had this young Redemptionist endeared himself to the people of the Barra Isles. However, the bishop did not concede to the wishes

of the Barra people on this point. On the contrary, he proceeded to remove the young Redemptionist from his charge, and to appoint in his stead a secular candidate whom he had had in his eye for some little time. On the nomination of a successor, the bishop wrote to the priest asking him to quit Barra ; but the natives would not hear of his leaving them, and even refused to let him go.

To keep his Memory Green

Ultimately the bishop felt constrained to make a voyage to Castlebay, to explain to the natives the expediency of the change he had effected against their wishes. In the end the Islesfolk submitted to the bishop's ruling ; and, on leaving Barra, the young Redemptionist priest suggested to them that, since they loved him so dearly, they might keep his memory green by renaming a certain Island lying off the entrance to Castle Bay. And so they called the Island Maoldomhnuich, or Muldoanich, in remembrance of " the tonsured one of the Lord's Day."

By the East Coast fishermen, who during the fishing season visit the Western Isles in great numbers, the Island of Muldoanich is called " Muldoon"—the reason being, according to a Barraman living at Kentangval, that they are either too tired or too lazy to pronounce the last syllable. Well, whatever other shortcomings the East Coast fishermen may have, no one possessing any personal knowledge of the manner in which the herring fishing is prosecuted in the Hebrides would accuse them of laziness ! But for their industry and enterprise, both Castlebay and Stornoway would be poor places !

The Old Order changes

Kisimul Castle did not evade the pronouncement of the seer ; and at least three prophecies concerning it are current in the Barra Isles. One of these is alluded to in a footnote to Blundell's *Catholic Highlands of Scotland*. According to this prophecy, the suzerainty of the MacNeils over Barra was to terminate about the time that the bay, in which Kisimul stands, became a forest of trees. Scanning the great expanse of relatively deep water known as Castle Bay, it seemed impossible that such a prediction could ever have come to pass. Now, in the course of time, the MacNeils were compelled to part with their ancient heritage in the Hebrides. This change in the ownership of Barra was effected in 1838, when General MacNeil sold the Island to Colonel John Gordon of Cluny, who figured notoriously in the "Clearances." Poor MacNeil died in 1863, mourned of the Barra people. At the present day Barra is the property of Lady Gordon-Cathcart, who married Sir Reginald Cathcart on the demise of her first husband, John Gordon, son of the said Colonel Gordon of Cluny. By 1845 Colonel Gordon had purchased extensive territories in the Outer Isles. About 1840 the Clan Ranald properties in the Long Island were disposed of by Ranald George MacDonald, who succeeded to them when but a child. By 1845 all South Uist and Benbecula became the property of Colonel Gordon. The purchase price paid by him for these estates was £163,799, on a rental of slightly over £8,000.

Yet, in one sense, there appears to have been something in the old prophecy so far as Barra was concerned, for, just



SON OF THE WOLF IN HIS PRIVATE CREEK AT KERSHADER.



LOCH ERISORT AND THE DROOPING NIGHT.

about the time that the change in the proprietary of these Islands was taking place, Castle Bay (Kisimul Bay in some old charts) was so crowded during the fishing season with the masts of wherries and sailing craft of every description that, when reviewed from the hills above, it might have been described as a forest of pruned and snedded trees.

A Cairn for Thrushes

The other two prophecies adverting to the future of Kisimul Castle are associated with one Mac a' Chreachain, Son of the Scallop, who on a time was a steward in the employ of the MacNeils of Barra. Mac a' Chreachain was practised in the art of foretelling the future by means of the shoulder-blades of live-stock that had died, or had been slaughtered for food. Time was when this mode of divination was not uncommon in the Western Isles.

At the termination of a banquet in Kisimul Castle, MacNeil summoned the Son of the Scallop, and thrust into his hand a shoulder-blade, from which he prevailed upon him to prognosticate the fate of his Castle and heritage. Loth, indeed, was the prophet to comply with his Chief's request, being fearful that the verdict of the shoulder-blade might be such as would prejudice MacNeil against the interpreter. However, on being assured that no harm would be done him in the event of an untoward reading, Mac a' Chreachain proceeded to examine the shoulder-blade, and to express in well-chosen words what its marks and indentations adumbrated.

He told his breathless listeners that, when deer from the mountains of South Uist swam across the Sound to Barra and were to be found on every hill in MacNeil's

domains, and when the inhabitants of Balnacraig (a clachan far from the sea) worked at the sea-ware, Kisimul Castle would become a cairn for thrushes.

Others contend that the Son of the Scallop augured the arrival of a ship with a cargo of blue wool, the unassisted coming ashore of a blind man, and the advent of a ground-officer with prodigious fingers, who would measure the lands of Barra with a string of iron.

Came a ship laden with blue cloth one day ; and she foundered on one of the innumerable submerged reefs off the Barra Isles. And a blind man escaped miraculously from her.

And in course of time the ground-officer came too ; and, while he was surveying the Island of Barra with a Gunter's chain (the string of iron !), the natives were swift to observe that every finger of him was "as big as a bottle."¹

The Haunt of Otters

On another notable occasion on which the Chief and his *ban-tigherna* (lady) were entertaining on an extravagant scale at Kisimul, the latter commenced to brag to her guests about the great MacNeil domains, and concluded her ancestral panegyric with the observation that, as long as the tide laved the rock on which Kisimul Castle stands, so long would the MacNeils remain overlords of the Isle of Barra. Now the Son of the Scallop, who was in attendance on the table at the time of this utterance, was prompted to reply in effect that, before Roderic of the seventh Roderic succeeded to the chiefship, the power of the MacNeils

¹ J. G. Campbell's *Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland*.

would be on the wane in Barra, and Kisimul Castle would become the haunt of otters.

“When you will see the ground-officer with the big fingers coming to Barra,” quoth Mac a’ Chreachain, “woe betide those there and those *not* there (the unborn), for the poor of Barra will be having to put the grain on the *slabhraidh*”—that is, on the iron chain attached to the swee, from which a pot is suspended over a fire.

Banished to Muldoanich

For having given expression to so far-reaching a prediction in the hearing of such an illustrious company, Mac a’ Chreachain was banished to Muldoanich, where he died in seclusion and abject poverty. And to this day one may see among the heather on the Castlebay side of the Isle of the Deer the green patch above the sea where the Son of the Scallop was wont to plant his potatoes. The Barra fishermen now refer to this patch as *Goirtean Mhic a’ Chreachain*, the Enclosure of the Son of the Scallop.

And it so happened that what had been foreshadowed by Mac a’ Chreachain came true. The seventh Roderic ruled over a tottering inheritance; and before long the MacNeils were leaving Barra in the hands of a stranger.

Otters take Possession of Kisimul

Then there came to Barra a factor who, they say, broke the islanders’ querns in order to compel them to convey their cereals to the parish mill over at Loch an Duin. These were the days when, in return for the milling, the miller was entitled to a proportion of what was ground by him.

For a time the natives of Barra resisted the intromissions of the factor ; and, rather than satisfy the demands of the miller, they resorted to the practice of hardening their seed in an iron pot slung over the peat fire.

And so Mac a' Chreachain's prophecy regarding the placing of the grain in a pot, swung on the *slabhraidh*, also came to pass.

And, when Kisimul became uninhabited, otters took up their abode amid its ruins ; and I am acquainted with one or two natives of Barra who depone to having seen them there, and whose veracity one has no reason to challenge.

Such are the stories of Muldoanich, anciently yclept Isle of the Deer.

XI

VATERSAY

ISLE OF THE WRECKS

LYING to the south and west of Barra, and separated from it by the Sound of Vatersay, is the Island of Vatersay. With the exception of Barra itself, Vatersay is the largest of the Barra Isles. Its area is roughly 3.9 square miles, the greater part of which is devoted to grazing.

Vatersay is the most curiously shaped island of any magnitude in the Hebrides. From the mariner's viewpoint, a swift glance at a reliable map or chart will convey a more adequate conception of its contour than would many pages of clumsy words. Its coast-line is beset with perils ; and in bygone days not a few ill-fated vessels went to their destruction on its sunken reefs and perilous bays. Consequent upon the erection in more recent times of lighthouses and beacons, the wreckings of vessels, once so common on the treacherous shores of the Northern and Western Isles, have been considerably reduced in number. Nowadays no competent navigator would mistake the Tràigh Shiar for the Sound of Vatersay, even on the darkest night. In the golden age of sail many schooners and brigs, steering eastward from the Atlantic, perished on the west side of Vatersay in endeavouring to make the port of Barra (Castlebay) by the Sound of Vatersay.

A Commodious Anchorage

In George Buchanan's time Vatersay was regarded as an Island " which, besides other great Conveniences, hath a Haven capable of holding many, and those very great, Ships ; whither at certain seasons of the year a great Company of Fisher-men flock together from the Countries round about." This evidence is substantiated by Dean Monro, who writes that Vatersay provided " ane excellent raid for shippes that comes ther to fische." At the time of the compilation of the *Old Statistical Account*, the Isle of Vatersay boasted a harbour capable of accommodating ships of any burden. Doubtless, the anchorage referred to by these early chroniclers is the spacious inlet on the east side known as Vatersay Bay, around the shores of which were a number of curing stations in the days when fishing was a more reliable and profitable occupation in the Western Isles than it has been for some years past.

The Ill-fated " Annie Jane "

The most notable shipwreck off Vatersay occurred in 1853. On the last day of September of that year the emigrant ship, *Annie Jane*, went to her total destruction on the west coast of this Island ; and between three and four hundred passengers perished with her. The luckless vessel, owned by Messrs. Holderness and Chilton, and commanded by one Captain Mason, left Liverpool under auspicious circumstances on 23rd August with a cargo of Scots and Irish emigrants. (I am using the word cargo advisedly !) The *Annie Jane's* first day at sea proved her incapacity to face the equinoctial furies prevailing at the time. In the

gales of the night of 25th August she rolled so heavily to windward that her fore and mizzen topmasts were carried away. In this disabled condition she put back to Liverpool, whence she set sail again on 9th September.

A few days later the *Annie Jane* encountered another gale in which her masts and yards were so seriously rent that she was compelled to lie to for the better part of a week in order that the crew might patch up such damage as was reparable. To the passengers' solicitations that he should turn the ship about, Captain Mason paid no heed. For days and days the vessel drifted helplessly at the mercy of tumultuous seas and unabating tempests.

The Final Crash

With every dawn came increasing hopelessness ; and every nightfall brought nearer inevitable doom. Came Nemesis to the vast majority of the panic-stricken emigrants on the night of September 28, 1853 : a grating, a sudden crash, a shudder, and, above the fury of the storm, the tense silence that to the seafarer betokens disaster, sealed the fate of the *Annie Jane*. Oh, if you have been at sea during a terrible storm when something has gone wrong . . . when something has gone wrong . . . you will feel deep down within you what I am trying vainly to describe in words !

At daybreak on the 29th the West Sands of Vatersay presented one of the grimmest and ghastliest spectacles ever beheld in the Hebrides. To the raging billows, that still tumble in upon the Tràigh Shiar of Vatersay Isle, the ill-found *Annie Jane* had yielded a lifeless cargo. Captain Mason had mistaken this inlet for the Sound of Vatersay,

through which the vessel might have escaped from the fury of the Atlantic.

A Survivor's Story

Some little distance from the scene of the wreck is the old farm of Vatersay, whither the survivors (102 in number) were escorted by the few servants in the employment of the only tacksman on the Island at the time of the fatality. A survivor, who effected his escape through a skylight, described the tragedy thus : " When the ship grounded I was in the cabin, which filled instantly with water, drowning the majority of the passengers there, and whose dead bodies completely blocked up the companion-way. Scores of men, women, and children were drowned or trampled to death."

Tradition in Barra has it that, in order to assist them in their rescue work, the inhabitants of Vatersay kindled a large fire on the shore. This fire was observed by the crew of a vessel steering past the West Sands (Tràigh Shiar) with a cargo of salt. Taking it to be the signal of a ship in distress, a boat was lowered without delay ; but, being unfamiliar with this treacherous coast and sorely harassed by the tempest, the boat and its crew of nine reached neither the wreck nor the fire on the shore, since they were driven to destruction and death on the rocky shore of the Tràigh Vanish, to the north of the Tràigh Shiar.

A Malicious Libel

It has been said repeatedly that the survivors of the *Annie Jane* received harsh treatment at the hands of the inhabitants of Vatersay, who were alleged to have been eager to despoil them of such personal effects as they had

managed to save from the wreck. The tradition that the people of Vatersay struck down the wretched survivors with a stone in the foot of a stocking has been recited to the writer on more than one occasion while pottering about the Barra Isles with a lugsail. For such a belief there seems no foundation in fact. To commence with, there was only one tenant in residence on Vatersay at the time of the disaster. His name, I believe, was Donald MacLennan. Apart from him and the farm labourers and shepherds he employed, there were no folks dwelling on the Island. Vatersay could not claim a single croft in 1853. Furthermore, the whole disaster must have been enacted before the news of it could have reached Castlebay. While there are some in Barra who will repeat this malicious libel, to most Barramen the mere suggestion of foul play on the part of the native population of Vatersay is as a red rag to a bull.

A Contemporary Account of the Tragedy

In support of the contention that the survivors of the *Annie Jane* were assaulted and despoiled, the following account of the tragedy, printed in the *Glasgow Herald* on October 10, 1853, contains not a vestige of evidence :

“ The sailing ship, *Annie Jane*, of between 1200 and 1300 tons reg. tonnage, belonging to Quebec, left Liverpool for Quebec at the beginning of September 1853. This was her second attempt to cross the Atlantic. The passengers (mostly emigrants) on the first attempt persuaded Captain Mason, the master, to return to Liverpool, and that they would not ask for the return of any of their passage money. A lively gale which was prevailing at the time belaboured the ship so much that the passengers

deemed it not safe to risk the voyage in her. The ship having arrived back at Liverpool, the fare tickets were sold at much reduced rates, and before long the ship proceeded to sea again with 450 persons all told, emigrant passengers and crew. Some of the emigrants belonged to the Isle of Skye, but the majority were from Ireland. After the third day out the ship encountered a lively gale, lost her mizzen-mast and sprang a leak, and the passengers were called to the pumps. The ship was drifting at the mercy of the gale for several days. Eventually the passengers managed to induce the Captain to return to a home port. On the evening of the third day after putting back, Barra-head Island was reported on the lee-bow. A desperate attempt was made to pass to windward, south of this Island, but of no use; the ship was merely drifting, and she narrowly escaped being driven on the n-ath Sgeir outside Ramhead in the Aird in Minglay. The ship was run aground on Vatersay west beach for no other reason than to save her falling or drifting on to the reef of rocks outside the entrance to the narrow sound between Vatersay and the foot of Ben Tanguial. The sailing ship, *Annie Jane*, went aground on Vatersay west beach between midnight and 1 a.m. on Thursday morning on the 29th day of September 1853. One huge wave swept the majority of her passengers and crew to instant death shortly after the ship took the ground, and soon after that the ship broke into three parts. Between 7 and 8 o'clock in the morning the remainder of the complement, 102 in all, including Captain Mason, were safely transported across a gangway that the people of Vatersay made from spars of the wreckage between the shallow water and the wreck's stern. The sailors were mostly French Canadians and two or three from Liverpool.

An old Irish woman tied one of her children on her back and another in her arms. The one in her arms was wrenched from her by a sea, but the other, a girl, was saved to tell the tale, not so many years ago either. Owing to the scarcity of wood there were only two coffins made, one for a Roman Catholic clergyman and one for Mr. Bell, the chief officer. The majority of the survivors were taken by Barra fishing boats to Tobermory, where they were transferred on board the *Chevalier* and thence to Glasgow, where they were interviewed by a representative of the *Glasgow Herald*, and to whom they reported the loss of ship and lives."

In Commemoration

Erected on a low eminence about the centre of the narrow strip of machar separating the Tràigh Shiar from Vatersay Bay is a simple unobtrusive monument of granite, commemorating the fate of the ill-starred *Annie Jane*. If, with the palms of your hands, you brush away the wind-borne sands surrounding the base of this monument, you will read the following inscription :

ON 28TH SEPT. 1853
THE SHIP "ANNIE JANE,"
WITH EMIGRANTS
FROM LIVERPOOL TO QUEBEC,
WAS TOTALLY WRECKED
IN THIS BAY,
AND THREE-FOURTHS
OF THE CREW AND PASSENGERS,
NUMBERING ABOUT 350,
MEN, WOMEN, AND CHILDREN,
WERE DROWNED,
AND THEIR BODIES INTERRED HERE.

The monument is said to mark the site of the great pit in which were interred the corpses of as many of the drowned as were recovered.

New Oats introduced to Barra

About a decade after the destruction in the Bagh Siar (or Tràigh Shiar) of the *Annie Jane*, a vessel called the *Bermuda* was dismasted in a storm on the Atlantic coast of Vatersay. She was on a voyage from Dumbarton to the West Indies with a cargo of coal, bricks, oat-seeds in hogsheads, and huge pans to contain sugar-cane on the homeward voyage. She went on Vaskir—the name applied locally to a rocky headland on the south-east of Vatersay, and in the Bagh a' Deas, or South Bay. Vaskir is situated close to where the township of Eolisdale now is, and within calling distance of the reef known as Sgeir a' Chlogaid.

Excepting an Irishman, who lost his life while attempting to come ashore on a rope, the crew of the *Bermuda* was saved. It's an ill wind that blows nobody good, they say ; and it is alleged that the wreck of the *Bermuda* gave to the people the seeds of a species of oat hitherto unknown on the Barra Isles.

Barra and Brown Sugar

A few years later the *Mount Royal* of Liverpool, bound for North America in ballast, lost some of her yards in a tempest, and struck the sunken rock in Vatersay Bay on which a beacon was erected some years ago. The vessel got off at high tide ; but she was making water so badly that eventually it was deemed advisable to run her ashore in an inlet below Heishival Beag. About thirty-five years

ago the *Fanny*, sailing westward from Greenock with a cargo of coal and brown sugar—and beer!—encountered heavy weather in the locality of the Barra Isles, and was wind-bound in Vatersay Bay. So violently raged the tempest that, even in this comparatively sheltered Bay, she dragged anchor, and was driven ashore on the Uidh of Vatersay. An old seaman residing at Kinloch, in Barra, told me that the *Fanny* was purchased by a Lewisman, who salvaged her and took her in tow to Stornoway.

Beer had been known in Barra many generations prior to the wrecking of the *Fanny*; but the seafarers of the Barra Isles declare that her coming ashore on the Uidh was the means of introducing brown sugar to the natives.

Torpedoed in Halves

Aground upon the sands about the centre of Vatersay Bay is the stern half of a fairly large vessel that, while on a voyage to Northern Russia, was torpedoed during the Great War. Inquiries made locally elicited the statements that the stern half of this ship drifted towards Barra, and finally was towed into Vatersay Bay by a number of drifters. The fore part of the vessel is said to have found its way over to Ireland. I was told by a man in Castlebay that eight or ten puffer-loads of timber were taken off that part now aground and rusting in Vatersay Bay, and covered with barnacles.

Several other wrecks have occurred on the treacherous shores of Vatersay; but time and tide have not been slow in removing the evidences of them from the sight of men.

XII

ISLE OF VATERSAY

SUMMER DAYS AMONG THE WESTERN ISLES

ALL day long in time of summer small boats are plying between Barra and the emerald Isle of Vatersay. In the height of the fishing season the inhabitants of Vatersay contribute no mean quota to the labour employed on the several curing stations scattered around the capacious sea-loch known as Castle Bay. In the early morning, when the great fishing fleets operating in the Minch are racing to port with their catches, the wide, open sheet of water separating Barra and Vatersay is agog not only with drifters and wherries but also with smaller sailing craft conveying men and women and girls to their daily work at and around the clachan of Castlebay. And, indeed, the invasion of Castlebay by white and brown lugsails, threading their way from all directions towards Barra with a fresh morning wind, creates a scene of tense picturesqueness, and reflects much of the real poetry of the Western Isles.

Even in the close season there is considerable coming and going between Vatersay and the mother Isle of Barra. By reason of there being no adequate shops on Vatersay, the dwellers on that Island are continually sailing over to Castlebay to procure at the local stores in that village such necessities as they are unable to raise on their crofts.

Sea-ways to Vatersay

The usual sea route followed by small boats sailing from Barra to Vatersay terminates at a convenient spot in Corraig Bay. This route entails a voyage of roughly two and a half miles, when calculated from the vicinity of Kisimul Castle. The ideal conditions for this passage are a beautiful day of warmth and sunshine, a fair wind to port, and a boat sufficiently in ballast to obviate the necessity for putting a reef in the sail in the event of a sudden gust.

The shortest sea passage between Barra and the Isle of Vatersay is only a few hundred yards if one prefer to cross the swift-flowing channel known as the Sound of Vatersay. Should you arrive at a point on this Sound opposite the township of Caolis, a shout or a whistle will attract the attention of one of the islanders, who gladly will hoist sail and make toward you with the object of transporting you to Vatersay. But, in order to reach the Sound of Vatersay from Castlebay, one is obliged to tramp some little distance on foot along a hilly track that, skirting the head of Loch Kentangval and passing round the south-eastern shoulder of Ben Tangval, leads down among the rocks to a small patch referred to in the Gaelic as Goirtean, or "the Gortan" (pronounced "gorstan"). Immediately opposite Goirtean lies the clachan of Caolis, in Vatersay—thus named because of its situation at the narrows of the Sound of Vatersay.

Driven out by Rats

Not wanting in lore is the district traversed by the track that strikes off from the main Barra road at Kentangval,

and bears round by Nask and the shoulder of Ben Tangval to "the Gortan," where upon a time no fewer than five or six families subsisted on the small area of green land that gave to this region its name. The Gaelic word, *goirtean*, is applied to a field of arable land, or to an enclosure or isolated patch of green territory, such as one might find among the hills. Changed conditions in the Isles, and the increasing difficulties encountered in finding adequate maintenance on holdings so small and unremunerative, induced the colony inhabiting "the Gortan" to abandon this meagre patch of cultivable land, and to seek its fortune elsewhere—probably in America, when evictions became the order of the day in the Hebrides. But, albeit many years have elapsed since this region became unpeopled, the greenness of "the Gortan" still draws the attention of the passer-by, and even of the seaman at some considerable distance offshore.

About a quarter of a mile to the east of Goirtean, and in the neighbourhood of a little brook, were four farms; and to this day the folks of Barra refer to the ruins of one of the farmhouses as the Tobhta Mhosach (literally, the "nasty ruins"), because they say that its occupants were forced to evacuate it on account of a plague of rats that came ashore nearby, and from a vessel that went aground off Caolis, on the Sound of Vatersay.

A Hill with Seven Shielings

There is a saying that in olden times Ben Tangval possessed seven hills and seven glens and seven flourishing shielings. And so far removed from one another were the shielings that the bellowing of a cow on one could not be



MORNING SHADOWS AT CASTLEBAY.

(Photo by Annie MacDonald, Loch Maddy.)



ISLE OF MULDOANICH AND THE MINCH.

(Photo by Annie MacDonald, Loch Maddy.)

heard on another. In course of time these shielings became the nuclei of small crofting townships.

Of later date than any of the seven shielings was Airidh Ruairidh Sheumais, the Shieling of Roderic, son of James. The site of this shieling adjoins the bridle-track leading round Ben Tangval toward Goirtean. Ruairidh Sheumais was appointed herdsman of Ben Tangval. In his day fences were unknown in the Barra Isles, and the drystone dykes were in a state of sore dilapidation: wherefore it was Roderic's particular duty to restrain the cattle and sheep pastured on Ben Tangval from invading the isolated patches on which it was customary to raise potatoes and cereals. In fact, Roderic, son of James, was what to-day is referred to in Barra as a grazings constable.

Like a Molten Mosaic

One of my earliest visits to Vatersay was made in the company of one Seumas MacKinnon, a well-informed resident of the village of Kentangval, and the grazings constable of Ben Tangval forby. Long had it been Seumas's intention to take me over to the house of his cousins, the MacLeans, at Caolis, in Vatersay, in the expectation that they might be coaxed to recite to me some yarns about Mingulay, the Island on which they had dwelt for a number of years, and of which they sometimes recount weird stories to those who ceilidh on them. The brightness of a summer afternoon attracted us to the pathway leading round to the narrowest part of the Sound of Vatersay. On our coming to "the Gortan," Seumas put himself to no end of inconvenience to trace out, for his own amusement as well as for my edification, the ruins of the habitats that once

existed here, and to delineate the extent to which this locality had been tilled in pre-eviction years. When we arrived among the tide-laved rocks forenensst Caolis, Seumas rent the silence of the sunlit firmament with a whistle so shrill and piercing that in the matter of a few minutes a young lad was hoisting sail in a sequestered creek on the Caolis side of the Sound. The Sound of Vatersay was glistering and sparkling at the time. From where we stood it resembled a sheet of molten mosaic, in the midst of which a lugsail swirled about like a dizzy, erratic thing at the mercy of the capricious currents racing through between the Atlantic and the Minch.

Sea-sparkle among the Barra Isles

When the lugsail did reach our side of the Sound, it demanded all the skill and strength of its navigator, of Seumas, and of myself to prevent her fragile timbers from being hurled against the sharp rocks by the sweep of the tide, and at the same time to effect our embarkation in a dry and uninjured condition. A light æstival breeze and a series of conflicting currents bore us in zigzag fashion to the strand of Vatersay Isle. The boat was moored alongside the stone jetty near the sandy-white bay of Caolis, where it remained until we had finished ceilidhing on the MacLeans.

During an intimate experience of the sea, I have never seen sea-sparkle like that to be witnessed on the Sound of Vatersay or on the Sound of Sandray in the zenith of summer. See these Charybdean waterways against the sun, and at the turn of the tide that chatters to the rocks as does the stream to the cascade among the tinient hills.

Not so very long ago I lay for half a day on an eminence in Vatersay, watching the ever-changing patterns of gold and blue, of green and white, designed by the noontide and afternoon sun upon the Sound of Sandray.

The Drowsy Calm of Summer

On another occasion Seumas and I rowed over to Vatersay from Horogh, near Kentangval, in a heavy coble, propelled by very indifferent oars. Warm was the atmosphere, and drowsy: scarcely a whiff of wind breathed upon the Barra Isles that summer day. Deep blue was the sea, and so calm that the frothy wake of our craft was discernible almost as far as the eye could see. We beached our boat on the margin of Cornaig Bay, and thereafter lingered leisurely in the direction of the broch known as Dùn a' Chaolais. Contemplating on the original dimensions of this prehistoric structure, and on the solidarity of its components, one is tempted to inquire how early man was able to collect on a steep knoll, and to place in position thereon, the massive boulders comprising the foundations of this ruined dun.

Against Wind and Tide

There came a sudden change in the temper of the weather toward evening. Sunshine and calm gave way to cloud and wind. A heavy swell and a steady headwind of no mean velocity made it doubtful whether we should even attempt to launch away from Vatersay. For a considerable time we pulled steadily at the bladeless oars without any perceptible progress. Every time Seumas

paused for a moment to adjust his footboard or to wipe the perspiration off his sun-tanned countenance, our boat was borne several yards towards the shore of Vatersay. For more than an hour we seemed never to be getting beyond Orosay Isle and the beacon on the Sgeir Liath, at the eastern entrance to the Sound of Vatersay. So retarded was our progress, and so strenuous the task of making any headway, that one felt driven to resorting to the sail and therewith tacking against wind and tide.

But Seumas was not for putting up the sail at all. Even with the assurance of taking in two, or even three, reefs, he could not be persuaded to give his consent. I never ascertained whether he harboured an unholy dread of all sails, or whether he feared that our clumsy coble was so constructed as to imperil the lives of its occupants when the sail was hoisted in anything more than a light breeze. It was a relief both to mind and to body when at long last we glided into a pool of quiet water in the lee of Ben Tangval, and were in a position once again to steer in ease and comfort toward the rock face known to this day among the Barra fishermen as *Creig a' Chruinn*, the Rock of the Mast. There it was that the ponderous mast of a lugger, owned by one of the MacNeil chiefs, was placed in position. The lugger was brought alongside the face of this rock, so that in calm weather its unwieldy mast might be lowered perpendicularly into it from an altitude of about twenty feet at mean tide.

Morag of the Heads

The comparative tranquillity of the sea outside "the *sruth*," at the entrance to Loch Kentangval, afforded us an opportunity of literally resting on our oars for a brief



REFLECTION—AWAITING WIND AND THE TURN
OF THE TIDE.

moment. During our well-earned respite Seumas, in a heroic endeavour to conclude the day's outing with the reciting of an unrecorded fragment of folklore, directed my attention to the whereabouts of a tidal islet named Uinessan, lying off the Uidh of Vatersay. Darkness was now gathering, with the result that at a distance of more than two nautical miles one could discern only the dim outline of Uinessan.

And here is Seumas MacKinnon's tradition respecting Uinessan and the ruined *caibeal*, or chapel, of Saint Brendan (*Cille Bhrianain*). Within this walled burying-place on Uinessan were interred the remains of *Mór nan Ceann*, Morag of the Heads, who was the wife of one of the chiefs of Barra. To this day the fisherfolks of the Barra Isles describe this site as *Caibeal Mór nan Ceann*. Morag, the tradition tells us, was a daughter of the laird of Coll. Had the rivals for her hand been cognisant of her dietetic whims, it is doubtful whether Morag would have been wedded at all, as she insisted upon dining on a fresh ox-tongue every day. For long enough did her tholing spouse, MacNeil of Barra, strive to accommodate her in this respect; but sorely depleted became his stock in consequence.

Finally it occurred to MacNeil that, if he could devise a scheme whereby he might bring home to Morag the grossness of her demand, she would be so horrified at her callous extravagance as to forgo her ox-tongue in the future.

MacNeil's Object-lesson

And so MacNeil, who was in residence at Eoligarra with his retinue at the time, directed the herdsman to

impound 365 head of cattle in a field viewed from the front windows of Eoligarry House. Greatly excited was Morag when she observed this vast herd from one of the windows ; and she proceeded to express her admiration of it in not a few words. And, when MacNeil interrogated her as to what she suggested should be done to any woman whose inordinate palate was responsible for the slaughter of so great a herd in a single year, she concurred that such a woman ought to be punished severely.

By means of this object-lesson the chief was able to illustrate to Morag that, at the rate at which she was consuming ox-tongues, she would be responsible at the end of a year for the slaughter of a herd of that size. And thereafter Morag of the Heads was content with simpler fare.

In Sight of Coll

In her declining years Morag expressed a desire to be interred at a place in sight of her native island of Coll. So, when she departed this life, her remains were conveyed in a boat all the way from Eoligarry to the tiny island lying off the Uidh of Vatersay, and known as Uinessan. As the day of her burial was hazy, it was not until the succeeding day, when the mists had lifted, that the Islesfolk discovered Coll could not be seen from Uinessan because of the Island of Muldoanich. Eager to exhume Morag's remains was MacNeil's people ; but the Chief of Barra protested on the grounds that already she had given him more bother than she had been worth. Wherefore the remains of Morag of the Heads were left undisturbed within the precincts of the now ruined *caibeal* on Uinessan, close to the Isle of Vatersay.

The Centre of Land Agitation

At the time of the compilation of the *Old Statistical Account*, Vatersay was divided into two distinct farms. The one belonged to MacNeil of Vatersay, while the other (the farm of Caolis) remained the personal property of the proprietor, MacNeil of Barra.

Not so very long ago, however, one could have written of Vatersay :

“ One only master grasps the whole domain,
And half a tillage stints thy smiling plain.”

For a number of years the crofters on the more congested parts of Barra had been casting furtive glances in the air of Vatersay. When in 1901, in respect of persistent land agitation, the Congested Districts Board was making negotiations for a settlement, a batch of Barramen sailed over from Castlebay and took formal possession of the Isle of Vatersay. In face of this substantial invasion, the tenant farmer was as impotent as was the proprietrix, Lady Gordon-Cathcart. The outcome of the Islanders' demonstration was that the Board purchased some sixty acres on the Uidh of Vatersay, valued at about £600. This area was to be devoted to the growing of potatoes ; and the Board divided it among fifty cottars. Displeased with the allocation, partly on the plea that the soil of the Uidh was unsuitable for potatoes, in 1906 negotiations were concluded between the tenant of Vatersay and the Board for the rental of an additional area of twenty acres at ten shillings per acre.

The State purchases Vatersay

In the summer of the same year began the movement that culminated in the seizure of Vatersay, and ultimately in the purchase of that Island by the State. Growing discontent found expression in June, when a number of Barra cottars shipped cattle over from that Island to Vatersay in small boats, and left them to graze on lands in the occupancy of the tenant. The cattle were poind-folded by the tenant ; but the enclosure, in which he had impounded them, was broken down during the night-time, when the cattle were turned out on the farm again. Then the tenant removed the cattle to the mainland of Barra ; but their owners again transported them over to Vatersay during the night. And now the trouble commenced in real earnest.

In 1907 a number of crofters transferred themselves and their belongings from Castlebay to where now stands the neat township of Vatersay. They soon erected temporary dwellings, and forthwith proceeded to make their occupation the more secure by commencing cultivation. An epidemic of interdict and imprisonment followed the seizure. Ultimately the entire Island was bought by the State on behalf of the people.

The Exhausted Peat Hags

From the point of view of economics, the new holdings on Vatersay suffered from two serious defects. To begin with, they were too small to admit of the tenants' extracting from them more than the barest subsistence, though at the

time of the division it was taken into consideration that they would continue to supplement their incomes by the fishing industry.

The other drawback has been the local lack of fuel. The peat hags of Watersay were exhausted many years ago, for which reason the inhabitants are obliged either to purchase small quantities of coal or to cut peats elsewhere.

The return of correspondence that passed between Lady Gordon-Cathcart and the Secretary for Scotland and the Lord Advocate, with reference to the seizure and occupation by squatters of Watersay, and with regard to the proposed future arrangements in that Island, formed the subject of a lengthy, though not uninteresting, White Paper which was issued in 1908.

A New School

To-day Watersay is administered by the Board of Agriculture for Scotland. The sheds and shanties that characterised the original settlement have now been displaced by substantial houses ; and at the present time the township of Watersay is one of the tidiest in all the Outer Hebrides. In December 1927 a new school was opened on Watersay. It is situated a few yards below the site of the original school, in a corner above Watersay Bay. Built of red brick and roughcast, it is calculated to withstand the hurricanes that sweep the Barra Isles in winter, and sometimes even in summer. A native of Watersay, who had travelled widely in his younger days, and with whom I forgathered on the white strand of Watersay Bay one Sunday forenoon last summer, when the school was well on the way to completion, deplored the fact that bricks had been used

in its construction while thousands of tons of native stone were procurable at hand. And he described the erection as resembling the entrance to a factory built on the outskirts of a city. His statements contained a good deal of truth, and illustrated at all events that he had given some little consideration both to the æsthetic and economic factors involved in the construction of the new school on Vatersay.

Vatersay in Summer

My hours spent on the Isle of Vatersay are as golden hours in the golden days of my life. I cannot think of summer without thinking of Vatersay and all that Vatersay means : nor yet can I reflect on Vatersay without reflecting on summer and all that summer signifies—the soft, honey-scented wind wafted among the long, half-shrivelled bent ; a blue, cloudless canopy overhead ; a bluer sea filling the Bagh Siar on the west ; on the east a sea resembling a patchwork of green and purple and white ; cattle wading in the cool of the Atlantic ; conies keeking out of their burrows amid the sand-dunes ; tell-tale footprints and spoors where the sand is deep and hardened ; a few sea-birds gyrating dreamily about the sunlit slopes of Ben Cuier ; wild bees cleaving the soporose ether with a drowsy whirl, and lingering long among the vetch and catmint of the machar.

Left High and Dry

Often in the summer-time have I drowsed so long on this Island that the ebb has left my lugsail high and dry on the strand of Vatersay Bay, thus compelling me to await the coming of night and the tide that, perchance, might be

flowing at its coming. And I have slipped anchor and glided out of Watersay Bay while the spears and lances of the moon were piercing to the very heart of it, illuminating the "gems of purest ray serene," lying deep down upon its rippled floor.

I am wearying for more hours of sunshine on Watersay, and for the peace and quietude that at sundown are accentuated by the intermittent chirping of a sweetheart birdeen, and by the liquid lapping of a falling tide.

XIII

THE STORY OF TWO EMIGRANT SHIPS

FICTION VERSUS FACT

THE wholesale exportation to North America of the Hebridean and Highland people during the nineteenth century gave rise to a number of tales, of which the following is typical. Since the indiscriminate eviction and subsequent emigration of a certain class of tenant reduced the number of men capable of bearing arms, and of contributing either in service or in kind to the commonweal of the West Highlands, it was only natural that the chieftains of clans should have resisted the encroachments of those whose policy it was to displace, in their own selfish interests, a people so attached to the land of its fathers.

Among those who were sedulous in encouraging emigration from Barra were Roderic Og MacNeil of Brievig and his cousin, James MacNeil of Ersary. Imagining that it would be impossible for two men as poor and as uninfluential as they to effect the transportation of his people, MacNeil of Barra gave them permission to "try their hand."

Two Ships are chartered

Off went the cousins to Greenock, where they chartered two vessels on the strength of what they hoped to collect in fares from intending emigrants. Sailed two ships into



A DRIFTER UNLOADING HERRING : THE ISLANDS OF VATERSAY, SANDRAY,
AND MINGULAY IN THE DISTANCE.



MRS. MACLEAN (LATE OF MINGULAY) SEATED BY HER SPINNING-WHEEL
AT CAOLIS, IN THE ISLE OF VATERSAY.

Castle Bay some weeks later ; and many who had accumulated small sums of money resolved to book passages on one or other of them.

Froward now was MacNeil of Barra when he realised that the programme of his kinsmen was likely to be carried through. But the cousins had booked more passengers than they could accommodate on the vessels ; and, consequently, there ensued a violent harangue as to whether the passage money would be refunded to those for whom berths could not be found.

A Swift Messenger

In their dilemma they dispatched a messenger to MacNeil of Barra, who was living at Eoligarry, requesting him to come with all speed to Castlebay for the purpose of deciding who should sail and who should remain. The messenger was none other than Murchadh Ruadh MacDonald, a man celebrated in the Barra Isles for his adroitness in casting peats. It is said that Murchadh (Murdo) could spread out no fewer than seven peats at a time—a performance requiring great strength and skill.

MacNeil and his Kenspeckle Mare

Murchadh must have run to Eoligarry with incredible rapidity, since scarcely had he left Castlebay when MacNeil of Barra was observed coming over the hill between Kinloch and Kentangval, riding his kenspeckle, red mare. Only a few hundred yards behind followed Murchadh Ruadh MacDonald.

“ Surely, Murdo, you’re not trying to keep pace with

my mare ! ” said MacNeil, when at Allasdale he discovered that the messenger was sprinting at the mare’s hoofs. And, so as to beat Murchadh in the race for Castlebay, MacNeil spurred on his red mare. But in his anxiety to reach the village in time, and also to leave Murchadh as far behind as possible, he galloped his red mare so hard that he was never able to ride her again.

The Vessels weigh Anchor

On coming to Castlebay, the MacNeil and Ruairi Òg nearly came to blows. Ruairi’s father, seeing MacNeil strike his son, urged the latter to retaliate in proper style ; but Ruairi retorted that, on the contrary, he would strike the first man who so much as placed a finger on his Chief.

Without further delay the MacNeil selected those of his tenants who were to go to America, and then endeavoured to pacify those for whom accommodation could not be found.

In due course the ships weighed anchor ; and soon they faded out of the sight of those who had assembled by the shore to wave them adieu and God-speed.

Ruairi Òg discovers the Skipper’s Plot

Now, in order to encourage the passengers to spend what money they had in purchasing of the goodly supplies of liquor carried aboard these emigrant vessels (I am handing on the yarn to you just as I got it !), the skippers colluded with a view to making the voyages to America of as long duration as possible. This end was achieved by turning the ships about at night, and sailing eastwards.

But Ruairi Òg, himself a skilled navigator, was not long in discovering the plot of the skipper of the ship on which *he* happened to be a passenger. Forthwith he bound the skipper, and assumed control of the vessel until the emigrants were landed on the shores of Nova Scotia.

The Second Vessel long overdue

Weeks elapsed before the second ship arrived in America ; and, when its passengers heard tell of the distinction with which Ruairi Òg had acquitted himself, they came down so heavily upon his cousin, James MacNeil of Ersary, for *his* not having suspected the skipper, that poor James had to flee to Barra for his life.

I have given you this yarn just as I received it from the lips of one Neil MacPhee while basking in the sunshine on the machar above the white, white sands of Vatersay Bay one Sunday forenoon last year (1927). Neil has many a good yarn to tell ; and, had it not been that the receding tide was threatening to leave our boat stranded on the sands of Vatersay Bay, I would have jotted down a great deal more of what he was so eager to relate.

The Historical Version

The above yarn actually is founded on a series of historical facts ; and here are the facts so far as Robert Lister, XLVth Chief of the MacNeils of Barra, has been able to establish them.

Roderic (Ruairi) Òg, son of Roderic MacNeil of Breivig, together with James and Eachunn (Hector), sons of Eachunn

Òg of Ersary, had made the acquaintance of a man named Hugh Dunoon. A native of Killearnan, of which his father and brother were parish ministers in succession, Hugh Dunoon emigrated to Halifax, Nova Scotia, whence he removed to Pictou. There he prospered, and won such prominence in public affairs that he was made Crown emigration agent.

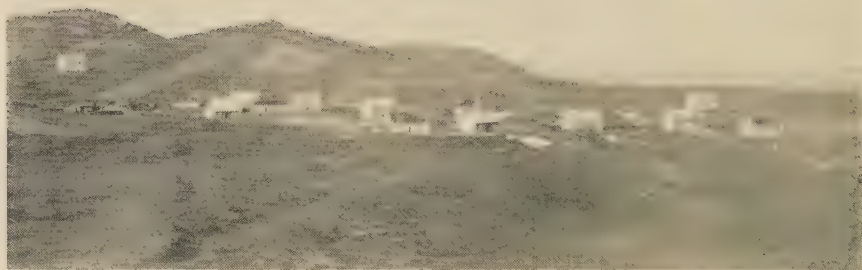
The Agents incur the Chief's Displeasure

James MacNeil of Ersary was the owner of a small sailing ship called the *Pigeon*. As a result of his coming in contact with Hugh Dunoon, he and Ruairi Òg of Breivig were commissioned to secure from the Island of Barra as many emigrants as they could.

Despite the Chief's displeasure, James MacNeil and Hugh Dunoon obtained a substantial quota in the early summer of 1801. James was the first to sail from Barra, and the first to reach Pictou. Dunoon followed in a larger vessel named the *Sarah*, with some seven hundred souls aboard. He left Barra in the month of June, and did not reach Pictou until late in September. The voyage occupied about thirteen weeks ; and in the course of it the *Sarah* was held up by a man-o'-war, the crew of which pressed twenty-five men, who ultimately were released in answer to representation made by Dunoon in his capacity as Crown emigration agent.

A Reconditioned Trading Vessel

James MacNeil of Ersary came back to Barra early in 1802. History records that, shortly after his return, he



THE VILLAGE OF VATERSAY.



THE AUTHOR AGROUND WITH A LUGSAIL ON THE WHITE SANDS OF
VATERSAY BAY.

and the Barra priest, Rev. James Macdonell, were drowned when the ship on which they were sailing to the mainland was wrecked off Rudh' Arisaig.

After the drowning of James, Eachunn Òg, his brother, also decided to go to America. Eachunn had become the owner of a large trading vessel. Anxious to take advantage of the epidemic of emigration that was rife in the Hebrides at this time, and having reconditioned his ship to accommodate passengers, in June of the same year (1802) he sailed for Pictou with nearly four hundred natives of Barra. The emigrants disembarked in August and settled on Pictou Island, and, later, on Cape Breton Island and Prince Edward Island. Subsequent batches of emigrants left Barra for America in 1811, 1817, and 1822.

The West Highland colonisation of North America is one of the most thrilling chapters in the history of the New World.

XIV

FOLK-TALES OF THE BARRA ISLES

HOW KISIMUL WAS RETAKEN—A FAERY AND A KETTLE

INCLUDED in the folklore of the Barra Isles is a number of legends and tales that, with slight local variations, have their parallels in the lore of other parts of the West Highlands and Hebrides. For instance, as I mentioned in a chapter in *Over the Sea to Skye*, dealing with the mysterious disappearance of pipers, even the Isle of Barra has its *Uamh an Oir*, or Cave of Gold, with which is associated the legend so widely current throughout Scotland. Near Ru-fear Vatersay, and in that part of Castle Bay known as Garrygall, is an *Uamh an Oir*, or Cave of Gold.

When the Candles were extinguished

Local tradition insists that the other entrance to this cave is near Dun Chlif, at the north end of the Isle of Barra, and that a piper, accompanied by his faithful dog and a few followers, went in by the Garrygall entrance, in an endeavour to penetrate to the other end. But the water percolating through the roof of that part of the cave passing under Loch an Duin extinguished the candles of those who escorted the piper ; and all perished in this Cave of Gold save the dog, which followed its nose until it emerged near Dun Chlif, in a drenched and haggard condition.

Yet, despite the persistence and diffusion of folk-tales

such as that identified with Caves of Gold, the Barra Isles are rich in traditional tales that are peculiar to them, and that in many respects bear little semblance to the folk-tales of other parts of the West Highlands. And so it is my wish to record here a number of the tales that, more or less, are endemic in these Islands, and still are recounted round the peatfire at a typical Barra ceilidh.

Driven out by the Northmen

To the list of stories I already have recited to you concerning Kisimul Castle may be appended the following strange fragment of traditional hearsay as it was related to me at Kentangval last summer.

It is said that one of the MacNeil chiefs of Barra, driven out of Kisimul by the Lochlannaich, was forced to seek shelter in the north of Ireland. You will recall, incidentally, that the MacNeils of Barra claim to be descended from Neil of the Nine Hostages, who became Ard-Righ or High-King of Erin in the year 379. Wherefore it was only natural that, in times of stress and adversity, they should repair to that country, or expect succour from it. During the suzerainty over the Barra Isles of the MacNeils there was considerable intercurrence between Barra and Ireland.

Children of an Exiled Chief

Now there were to the chief, who had been compelled to surrender his Hebridean stronghold to the dauntless corsairs from Lochlann, two young children—a boy and a girl. These children used to attend school in Ireland; but for long enough they were at a loss to understand why their Irish schoolmates took delight in calling them “*na*

Barraich”—that is to say, “the Barraichs” or “the Barra-ites.”

Having made incessant complaints to their parents regarding the indignity to which they were being subjected at school, and resolved to extricate from them some explanation or interpretation of their byname, the children declared a hunger strike as a protest against the secrecy of their parents. To their entreaties that they should be told the origin of the term applied to them, their aggrieved father urged that his telling them would serve no useful purpose.

However, at long last he felt constrained to confess to them that he was the exiled chief of an island in the Hebrides called Barra, in a bay in which stood a great castle known as Kisimul, whence they all had been expelled when the Lochlannaich seized his domains.

The Chief's Instructions

On hearing his father's woeful tale, the boy swore vengeance on the Lochlannaich, and began to devise schemes such as might be the means of restoring the ancestral stronghold of Kisimul to its rightful owners. Before long he was making arrangements with the crew of an Irish vessel to convey him and his sister and an *ochdramhach*—an eight-oared galley—to the Barra Isles.

When MacNeil of Barra realised that his children were intent on going to the Hebrides in the hope of wresting Kisimul from the Lochlannaich, he gave them certain sailing directions, for none of the crew was too familiar with the navigable waters of the more southerly of the Barra Isles. Having explained to them that to the southward of Barra

there lay five fairly large islands, he told them that, if there still resided on the island called Sandray an old, trusty friend of his, they should take him into their confidence, because he knew of no one who could render more valuable assistance to them in the attainment of their purpose.

Still loyal to MacNeil of Barra

Eventually they embarked from Ireland ; and at the falling of the succeeding day the Irish skipper descried what he took to be Berneray, the Island on which Barra Head Lighthouse now stands, and the most southerly of the Outer Hebrides. Some hours later found young MacNeil and his sister on the strand of Sandray, whence, following their father's instructions, they made for a certain house, into which daylight and air were admitted by mere holes in the wall in lieu of windows. Having crept up to the wall and listened at one of the holes, the boy was relieved to learn from a conversation in progress within that the inmates of the house still were loyal to his father's cause. Keeking through one of the holes, he observed a *bodach* (an old man) lying face downwards upon the earthen floor, near the fire, while his *cailleach* (old woman or wife) was rubbing salt butter into the back of him.

"If old MacNeil would be in Barra, it's no myself that would be in this sorry plight," the old man was heard to mutter through his writhing. At this opportune moment young MacNeil and his sister entered the house, and introduced themselves to its agèd occupants. In course of conversation they discovered that the old man tenanted the Isle of Sandray ; and, by way of explaining his pitiable condition to them, the *bodach* related how the new governor

at Kisimul Castle had slashed him across the back for being unable to pay his rent to the full.

A Race against Tide

Scarcely had young MacNeil and his sister divulged the object of their mission when the old man expressed his willingness to assist them, as best he could, in driving the Lochlannaich out of Kisimul. Meanwhile the old woman was getting out the *cota mor* (big coat) ; and, as she was in the act of buttoning it, the old man urged that, since the tide was at the turning, they and their Irish crew should hasten toward Castlebay, in order that they might seize the *geimhleag*—the iron level or crow-bar—before the tide came in upon it again. This they did ; and everything went according to plan. With the aid of the *geimhleag* the portcullis of Kisimul was levered up ; and in a trice young MacNeil, his sister, the *bodach*, and the Irish seamen, having surprised the garrison, slew its Lochlannaich occupants *ad unum*—to a man.

Pierced by an Arrow

So as to “mak siccar,” the old man of Sandray Isle advised young MacNeil to leave no stone unturned in endeavouring to dislodge from a castle near Loch Boisdale the most formidable man among the Lochlannaich rievvers, who at this time infested every creek of the Western Isles. Therefore they hastened off to South Uist to complete their task. On arrival there the *bodach* stealthily approached the castle held by the Lochlannaich, and deceived its guard into believing that an enemy was at hand. And when the chief man among them put his head out of one of the

peepholes in order to ascertain from which direction the enemy was coming, the old man of Sandray sent an arrow through his neck, with the result that he could not withdraw his head into the castle. In this wise perished the leader of the Lochlannaich in South Uist.

The remainder of the garrison was put to the edge of the sword ; and so successful had been the tactics employed by young MacNeil, with the assistance of the Sandray *bodach* and the Irish crew, that he was able to return to Ireland immediately with the tidings that the time was come when his father might resume his occupancy of Kisimul Castle.

And thus it was that the MacNeils found their way back to Barra.

A Faery Tale of Sandray

Another folk-tale of Sandray, translated from the Gaelic,¹ tells how the wife of a herd on that Island made friends with a woman of peace, who came to borrow her kettle. Lived in a "brugh," or faery knoll, not far off a banshee, or woman of peace, who would be seeking the kettle every day. Not a word would the woman of peace utter when she came to borrow the kettle. It was her wont to enter the house silently, and appropriate the utensil without any explanation or ado. As she was in the act of quitting the house, the herd's wife would be saying to her :

" A smith is able to make
Cold iron hot with coal :
The due of the kettle is bones
And to bring it back again whole."

¹ J. F. Campbell's *Popular Tales of the West Highlands*.

Under the spell of this rhyme the kettle was sure to return to its owner before daybreak.

Petrified with Fear

And every day the woman of peace came back with the kettle filled with juicy bones. And, on a day that there was, the herd's wife, before going on an errand to Baile Castle (the Township of the Castle—Castlebay in this case), instructed her goodman to tell the banshee, should she come for the kettle in her absence, whither she had gone.

"Surely it's myself that will tell her," replied the herd. Now he happened to be spinning a heather rope at the end of the croft (*i.e.*, at the gable of his cottage) when he saw the woman of peace approaching; and he took fear at the sight of her, fled into the house, shut the door, and refused to open it to her. Determined not to be outwitted, the banshee climbed up to the hole that was in the roof of the house, just above the fire. Thereupon the kettle gave two jumps, and then flew out by the hole in the roof.

When the herd's wife returned from Baile Castle, she asked her husband where was the kettle. And he confessed to her how he had closed the door in the face of the woman of peace, and how petrified with fear he was when the kettle began to jump on the hearthstone, and ultimately disappeared through the hole that was in the roof above the fire.

The Unreturning Banshee

Night came; but with the kettle the woman of peace returned not. Having scolded her husband for his childish

conduct, the goodwife of Sandray hastened away to the faery "brugh," where the kettle was awaiting her. On lifting it she found it heavy with the remnants of the faeries' evening meal. And, as she was making off with it, she heard a voice saying :

" Silent wife, silent wife,
That came on us from the land of chase,
Thou man on the surface of the ' Brugh,'
Loose the Black, and slip the Fierce."

No distance had she travelled with the kettle before two angry dogs came bounding after her. And she thrust her hand into the kettle and threw out to them a quarter of what it contained. But the dogs followed on ; and, ere she arrived home, she had given them the entire contents of the kettle in her endeavour to pacify them.

Jealous, to be sure, were the dogs of the township of Sandray when they perceived that the herd's wife was feeding the dogs of peace.

But never again came the banshee to seek the kettle.

This legend, with slight local variations, is also associated with Ballevoulin, in Tiree ;¹ but there is no evidence to prove that originally it belonged either to Tiree or to the Barra Isles.

A Faery's Desire

Another faery tale is told of Pabbay, the Island lying between Sandray and Mingulay. Came a famishing woman of peace to the door of a man on the Island of Pabbay ; " and she had the hunger of motherhood on her." Food

¹ Campbell's *Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands*.

she was given ; and there she tarried the night. And, turning to her host as she was leaving on the morrow, she said, " The desire is with me that hereafter none of the people of this Island may go in childbed."

And from that moment—so the story has it—no one dwelling on Pabbay ever departed this life in childbed.

An Eldritch Experience

Reminiscent of the story concerning the woman of peace who lived in the faery knoll on the Isle of Sandray, and was in the habit of coming regularly to the herd's house to borrow the kettle, is the following fragment associated with the township of Tangusdale, in Barra. Once there lived in Tangusdale a woman who, when herding a couple of calves in the lateness of the night, was overtaken by a storm. Having found the calves, she hurried to the leeward of a little knoll (*tulman*) near by. As she was in the act of driving the tether-peg into the knoll, lo ! it opened before her very eyes ; and she heard within what she imagined to have been the sound of a swee-crook clanging against the side of a pot.

Now the woman of Tangusdale took wonder at this weird sound ; and she immediately desisted from striking the tether-peg any farther into the *tulman*. In a moment a witch-like creature thrust her head and shoulders out of the little knoll, and said : " What tempts you to be disturbing the peace of the *tulman* in which I have my abode ? "

To this the Tangusdale herdswoman answered and said : " I am herding this couple of calves ; and wet am I, and worn out by the wind and the rain."

“ Well,” replied the occupier of the *tulman*, pointing in the darkness to a spot where she knew there were some tufts of grass among the heather, “ if you will be taking the calves down yonder, and can coax them to eat, you will not be a day without a milch cow as long as you remain in the flesh.”

And the herdswoman of Tanguisdale did as she was bidden ; and never thereafter was she without a milch cow, though she lived four score years and fifteen after the night on which she unwittingly had disturbed the repose of the woman who dwelt in the *tulman*, or little knoll.

MacNeil's Bardess deceives the Invaders

Another link in the long chain of circumstances connecting Barra with Ireland was MacNeil's bardess, Nic Iain Fhinn (Nic Iain Aoidh, according to some), whom many regard as having been of Irish extraction. Legend tells us that, a decade or two after the return to Barra of the MacNeils, the Lochlannaich again sought to reduce the Island to their control. On this visit they brought with them so great a fleet of birlinns that they were able to ravage the whole Island with impunity. Only Kisimul Castle held out against them ; and so assiduously had they blockaded the old fortress that its capitulation seemed merely a matter of days. Increasing starvation faced the garrison as time dragged on ; and it was then that the happy idea struck Nic Iain Fhinn of dyeing a cow's hide a different colour each day, and hanging it over the battlements of the Castle to dry, so as to make believe that its defenders had an ample supply of emergency rations, and were far from caving in. Soon the Lochlannaich besiegers

became discontented and demoralised ; and, wearying of their protracted waiting, they weighed anchor and sailed away from Barra.

Nic Iain Fhinn and her Songs

The bardess, Nic Iain Fhinn, you ought to be reminded, was the authoress of the popular Hebridean song entitled "The Galley of Barra" (*A' Bhirlinn Bharrach*), more widely known, perhaps, as "Kisimul's Galley."

*"Latha dhomh am Beinn a' Cheathaich,
Air fal-il-o ; o-i-o-u,
Gu'n deach bata Chloinn Neill seachad,
O hi-o hu-o, fal-u-o."*

To Nic Iain Fhinn is also attributed "Kisimul's Cradle Croon" (*Mo Ruarachan*). She is believed to have composed this lullaby while in Kisimul, and to have crooned it to one of the many baby heirs called Ruairi, or Roderic.

Ay, ay ! and it was in Nic Iain Fhinn's day that Kisimul Castle was celebrated for "red wine and feast for heroes, and harping too."

Mac 'Ic Ailein and his Bardess

It was during the term of office at Kisimul of the bardess, Nic Iain Fhinn, that MacNeil of Barra entertained a prominent guest in the person of Mac 'Ic Ailein of the Isles. And on one of the many occasions on which his bardess had been song-making, MacNeil, turning to his Clan Ranald guest, declared that in all Uist there was not to be found a woman of Nic Iain Fhinn's talents.

Oh yes ; “ *agus cha b’urrainn Nic Iain Fhinn bhi cumail anns an uisge stiuraidh aice* ”—which, as the Gaelic expression has it, meant in effect that Nic Iain Fhinn could not keep up in the wake of Clan Ranald’s bardess. (Allusion to the wake of a swift galley frequently is made by seafaring communities in emphasising disparity or inferiority.) And so hot were MacNeil and Mac ’Ic Ailein of the Isles in extolling their respective bardesses that at length it was agreed mutually to test their skill by a competition of wits.

At the Waulking of the Cloth

In the preliminary toss-up to decide whether Nic Iain Fhinn would go to Uist, or whether Clan Ranald’s bardess, Nic a’ Mhanaich, would come to Kisimul, MacNeil of Barra lost. And so Nic Iain Fhinn was obliged to go to Uist. It was also agreed that the bardess, in whose territory the test was to be held, would have the privilege of commencing with such *ex tempore* compositions as she considered the occasion required.

On a specified day Nic Iain Fhinn went to Uist as arranged ; and she and Nic a’ Mhanaich placed themselves at either end of the waulking-board, on both sides of which were seated twelve Clan Ranald women. When the preparations preparatory to the waulking of the cloth had been completed, the Uist bardess began her waulking-song, the tenor of which was a condemnation of the Isle of Barra and of every thing pertaining to it, and a declaration that Clan Ranald’s daughters would not demean themselves by going to Castlebay as prospective wives for MacNeil’s sons.

And a verse of the *òran luadhaidh*, or waulking-song,

composed by Nic a' Mhanaich on the occasion of the waulking of the cloth in Uist ran thus :

The musical score is written in 2/4 time with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). It consists of two systems, each with a vocal line on a single staff and a piano accompaniment on two staves (treble and bass clef). The vocal line uses a mix of eighth and sixteenth notes, often beamed together. The piano accompaniment features chords and moving lines in both hands.

Cha teid Mòr do Bharraidh bhron-ach; Ho - ho - ro, tog-aibh i:

Tog-aibh is-e, tog-aibh eil-e; Ho - ho - ro, tog-aibh i. . .

Mòr (Morag) was the name of one of Mac 'Ic Ailein's many daughters. And the waulking-song records that neither Catriona nor Clan Ranald's youngest daughter would condescend to go to Barra to be wooed by any of MacNeil's sons.

MacNeil's Bardess wins the Day

All this time Nic Iain Fhinn had been keeping a calm sough. And, whenever the Uist bardess had exhausted her vituperative extemporisations, Nic Iain Fhinn commenced where her rival had left off, and to the same tune and refrain. At the outset she repudiated the charges that Nic a' Mhanaich had levelled against her Barra kinsfolk; and then she proceeded to accuse her of having inherited the evil tendencies of a witch. From this gratuitous insult Nic a' Mhanaich, unable to sustain this battle of wits and words, collapsed at the waulking-board.

It was conceded by the Captain of Clan Ranald—Mac 'Ic Ailein himself—and by all present that Nic Iain Fhinn, the Barra bardess, had won the day. In drawing her waulking-song to a happy conclusion, she turned toward Mac 'Ic Ailein, and told him that it would behoove him well to woo one of MacNeil's daughters. And, furthermore, she urged him to come to Kisimul with this end in view.

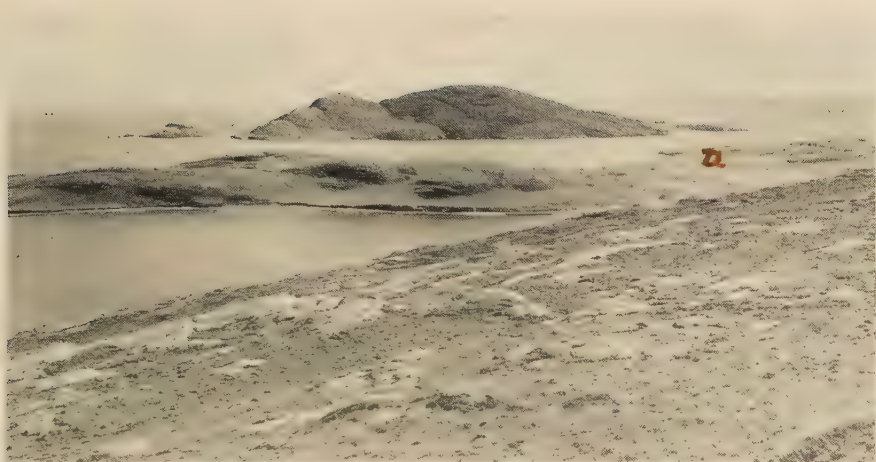
Nic Iain Fhinn's Name perpetuated

On Nic Iain Fhinn's return to Kisimul, MacNeil proposed to reward her for the consummate manner in which she had upheld the best traditions of her kinsfolk against such overwhelming odds. But the Barra bardess was not wishing to be rewarded for having done what, after all, she deemed her duty to the Chief. Instead, she asked MacNeil whether she might be allowed to give the name of Sgeir Nic Iain Fhinn to a certain rock at the entrance to Castlebay harbour. MacNeil respected her wish; and to-day this rock is known as Sgeir Nic Iain Fhinn.

A Hindrance to Navigation

Through a narrow, reefy channel to the west of Castle-bay, and in the district known as Horogh (Horve), the sea enters Loch Kentangval. The name applied locally to this narrow neck of water is *an sruth*, meaning "the stream"—thus called on account of the tremendous volume of water continually rushing in or out through it, except, of course, at slack tide. The maximum width of "the stream" is only a few yards. About the centre of it lies a huge rock, that is visible at mean and low water, and that for centuries has been a menace to local navigation. The navigating of a small fishing-boat, or even a rowing-boat, through this channel without mishap, except when the tide is full or almost so, is no insignificant feat.

If you wander round by the curing stations on the west shore of Castle Bay towards Horogh, after the turn of the tide, you will witness tens of thousands of tons of salt sea water dashing in or out through "the stream" with a rapidity and an irresistibility that make you feel quite queer. Many a time have I wondered why the fishermen of Kentangval do not take steps to have this channel blasted in such a way as to admit of the free passage at any time of fishing craft of average draught. In the event of the tide being too low at the hour at which it has been arranged to set sail from Loch Kentangval, the fisherman is obliged to take his boat through "the stream" when he can—sometimes on the previous day—and anchor her at a convenient spot to the eastward of the entrance to the Loch. Thus he is enabled to put out to sea irrespective of the state of the tide. And, similarly, if the tide be un-



VATERSAY BAY, THE SOUND OF SANDRAY, AND SANDRAY ISLE AS
VIEWED FROM HEISHIVAL BEAG.

(Note characteristic glaciated surface in the foreground.)

(Photo by Robert M. Adam.)



THE ISLAND OF BERNERAY AND BARRA HEAD LIGHTHOUSE, AS SEEN
FROM THE SUMMIT OF DÙN MINGULAY.

(Photo by Robert M. Adam.)

suitable when he returns, he must rope his boat to the rocks, and leave her there until the rising tide will permit of his bringing her in through "the stream."

A Military Deserter

Tradition in Barra has it that about eighty years ago *an sruth* was cleared by one Iain MacPherson, and under the following circumstances. MacPherson was a regular soldier stationed at Stirling. In order to entice her brother to desert the army, his sister went south from Barra in a local fishing-boat as far as Tobermory. Thence she travelled by steamer to Glasgow; and from there she went by stage-coach to Stirling. MacPherson fell in with his sister's design; but he was not long in his home in Barra when the local constable (whose authority at that time extended over South Uist as well as over Barra) was instructed to arrest him.

As the constable was stationed in South Uist, it was only on exceptional occasions that he found himself in Barra; and so, whenever he made his appearance on the hill above Kentangval called Cnoc Fraoich, the inhabitants knew well the object of his visit. When he entered by the front door of the house in which the deserter lived, MacPherson "went out on the back of the house," there being a back and a front door to it.

An Athletic Feat

Realising that the fugitive had escaped, the constable gave chase; but, being a man of no ordinary proportions,

he found himself quite unable to make up on MacPherson. However, he sent his sleuth after him ; and, in order to dodge this fierce creature, the deserter altered the course of his flight towards the peninsula of Horogh. When he came to " the stream " at the entrance to Loch Kentangval, a powerful current was rushing through with the outgoing tide. With one colossal running leap he succeeded in gaining a footing on the rock in the centre of " the stream " ; while another leap of somewhat similar dimensions bore him to *terra firma* on the opposite side.

In the meanwhile the constable was hurrying round the head of Loch Kentangval ; but, long ere he reached the clachan of Nask, MacPherson had concealed himself among the fastnesses of Ben Tangval.

The story-teller in Barra can offer no adequate explanation why a man, who could perform so prodigious a feat, did not bide where he was, and give the constable a sound hiding for molesting him !

" MacPherson's Cave "

Now, the west side of Ben Tangval is honeycombed with secret sea-caves, with which MacPherson had been familiar from boyhood. And he selected a cave situated high and precipitously above the sea, near which only the most daring would venture. Long did the constable tarry in Barra in the hope of locating the *uamh* in which MacPherson had taken refuge, and which to this day goes by the name of " MacPherson's Cave." And it is said that, so long as the constable remained in the Island, the deserter's sister used to convey food clandestinely to him.

Years later, MacPherson served in the American Civil

War ; and after the declaration of peace he returned to Barra, where he died about forty years ago.

Close to " MacPherson's Cave " is another cave known as *Uamh Moire Geire*, the Cave of Dun-coloured Morag. This cave received its name from the fact that Morag, the banished spouse of one of the MacNeil chiefs, lived here in exile.

XV

ANIMAL LORE OF THE BARRA ISLES

HOW A FOX TOOK A TURN OUT OF A GOAT—THE STORY OF A KEG OF BUTTER

THE Barra Isles share with the remainder of the West Highlands and Islands fragments of tales in which animals comprise the entire personnel—tales which, except in unimportant details, closely resemble authenticated parallels in the peasant lore of many peoples. Excluding obvious differences in local colour, and making allowances for native terminology, one sometimes might be excused for imagining that the wolf and fox stories of the Outer Isles were culled from Grimm, or perhaps that Grimm collected his tales in the Hebrides and adapted them to suit the environment of his readers !

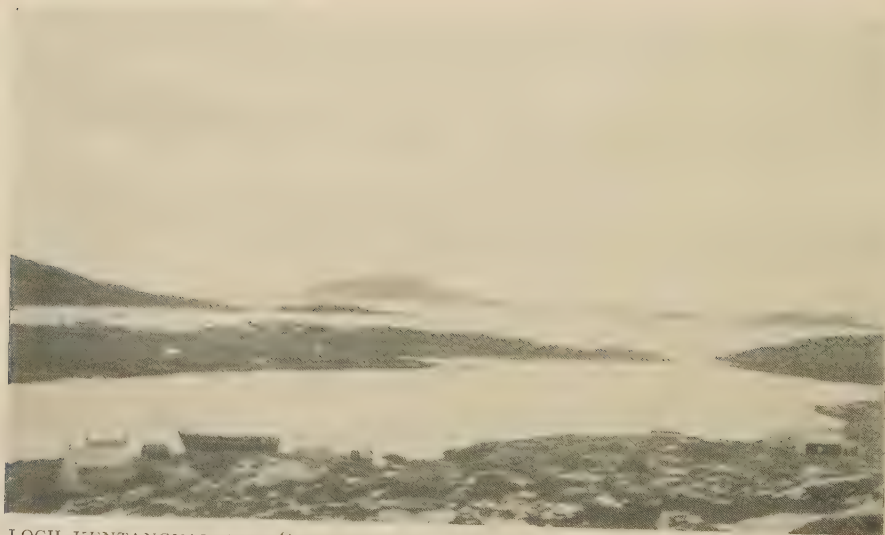
A few minor alterations of the stories recited in Barra of “ how the fox took a turn out of the goat,” and of “ how the cock took a turn out of the fox—and no creature ever took a turn out of him but that cock ” would render them identical with certain well-known German folk-tales.

A Fox's Depredations

Seventy years ago there lived in Barra a certain Hector Boyd, who was far famed for the manner in which he could



THE VILLAGE OF KENTANGVAL AND THE WHITE ROAD TO CASTLEBAY.



LOCH KENTANGVAL AND "THE SRUTH" IN THE FOREGROUND, AND THE ISLAND OF MULDOANICH AND THE UIDH OF VATERSAY IN THE OFFING, AS SEEN AT DUSK FROM THE SLOPES OF BEN TANGVAL.

recount traditional fragments concerning animals. He used to tell a story of how a grey goat, on returning to the fold, discovered that a fox had made off with her three kids. Black with real melancholy was the grey goat when she returned to find that in her absence her little ones had been stolen. So she took her way to the abode of the russet-dog (fox). On coming to it, she scrambled on to the roof; and the russet-dog, hearing movement about the thatch of his dwelling, cried out :

“ Who is that on the top of my bothy, maiden my deary,
That will not leave my cauldrons to boil,
That will not leave my bannocks to bake,
That will not let my little one go to the well ? ”

To this the grey goat replied :

“ Here am I, a grey goat, harried,
Seeking three kindly kidlings,
And the grey-breasted buck,
And the buck lad.”

Then answered the russet-dog from within :

“ Well then, by the earth that is beneath,
By the ether overhead,
By the sun that goes down,
I have never seen thy set of kids.”

Three Kindly Kidlings

Not a bird in the flocks about the Barra Isles did the grey goat fail to question as to the fate of her three kids; and not a bird could assist her in her sorry plight. However, one day, while she was searching the seashore, a

straw broke a leg of the hapless grey goat ; and she hirpled home to find :

“ Three kindly kidlings grey,
Grey-breasted,
With backs grey-backed,
And the buck grey-headed.”

Master Reynard's Denial

In course of time the grey goat went to the abode of the russet-dog for an explanation of his malevolent practices ; but Master Reynard slyly repudiated her imputations in the following terms :

“ By the blackthorn and the briar,
By the earth beneath my feet,
By the sun that has gone down,
Never have I seen thy set of kids.”

And never thereafter did the russet-dog put trouble upon the grey goat.

A Keg of Butter

About eighty years ago Neil MacNeil of Vatersay, then an octogenarian, used to recite a story in which a russet-dog (fox) and a wild-dog (wolf) quarrelled over a keg of butter. It so happened that, while searching for food upon the seashore of the Isle of Vatersay, a fox and a wolf, who shared the same den and conducted their predatory excursions in company with one another, lighted upon a keg of butter, which they agreed to conceal in the ground.

On the following day the fox went out, unbeknown to the wolf ; and when he returned he told the wolf that he had been invited to attend a baptism. He speedily attired

himself in his best raiment, and quitted the den in a hundred hurries, that he might clandestinely sample the contents of the keg.

Abroad Betimes

On his return, the wolf asked what name was put on the child at the baptism. Unhesitatingly the fox replied *Fo Bhial*, which name, being translated, meant "under the mouth."

On the morrow the fox again was abroad betimes. He told his partner that he had had another invitation to a baptism. And off again went he to the keg of butter. As a result of his second visit to the keg, he calculated that he had consumed about half its contents.

"Well," said the wolf to the fox, when the latter came back a second time, "what name did they put on the child?"

"Queer is the name—so queer, in truth, that I myself would not be giving it to a child of mine. The name on the child is *Moolay Moolay*" (*Mu leth*), which name, being interpreted, signified "about half and half."

An Epidemic of Baptisms

On the third morning the russet-dog hastened off to a third alleged baptism. On this occasion he finished all the butter, and was even reduced to licking the inside of the keg.

In answer to the wild-dog's question, he replied on his return that the name given at the third baptism was *Buill Imlich*, which name, being translated, meant "tackling and licking it all up."

On the fourth day the fox suggested to the wolf that they should unearth the keg of butter they had hidden, and roll it home. And so they set off together ; but, on digging up the keg, the wolf could not see a shadow of butter in it.

“ Ah ! ” observed the wolf, who all along had harboured suspicions regarding the spate of baptisms—“ ah, it’s not yourself that was long in coming to visit the keg of butter ! ”

The Wild-dog’s Experiment

And, although the russet-dog strove hard to refute the charge laid against him, the wild-dog, not believing a word, determined to justify his unbelief by conducting a practical experiment on his sly partner. When they reached their den again the wolf seized the fox and slung him up by his hind legs, with his head dangling below him. While the fox was suspended in this fashion, a lump of butter commenced to accumulate on his chin—*Fo Bhial*—under the mouth.

“ Thou red thief ! ” exclaimed the wolf, “ I said before that thou hadst visited the keg and devoured the butter.”

A Harvest of Oats

Not on the most friendly of terms were the russet-dog and the wild-dog when at the close of that day they retired to rest. In the morning the fox, regretting that he and his companion were spending their time in so great an excess of sloth, suggested that they should travel together to such and such a town-land, and begin to cultivate a piece of ground in it. On reaching the town-land they lost no

time in arranging a consultation with the landlord, who gave them a strip of land for "seven Saxon pounds."

Oats the new tenants sowed the first spring ; and in the autumn they reaped a goodly harvest. When they came to divide the increase, the fox asked the wolf whether he would prefer the root or the crop.

"Give me the root," replied the wolf. Wherefore the fox had fine oaten bread all the year, while the wolf had to content himself with fodder of a none too palatable kind.

The Wolf's Choice

Potatoes the new tenants sowed the following year ; and the potatoes thrived well.

Quoth the fox to the wolf at the end of the potato-lifting, "Name thy choice *this* year."

"Give me the crop (top), for you will not be taking the twist out of me any more" (*i.e.*, taking a "rise" out of him).

Now the innocent wolf did not understand that, while the root of a stalk of corn was not to be preferred to the crop, the root of a potato plant was more palatable than the top of it. And it was not until he realised that his share of the potato harvest was the shaws, and the fox's share the potatoes, that he again found the error of his choice.

The Wild-dog is beheaded

Howbeit, the wolf sought to compensate himself for his mistake by making occasional raids upon the fox's supply of potatoes. But one day the russet-dog urged the wild-dog to read the name he had branded on the hoofs

of a certain white mare that grazed in a neighbouring paddock. Away went the unsuspecting wild-dog; and, as he was searching the hoofs for the name, the white mare kicked him, thus severing his head from his body.

And never again did the luckless wild-dog put trouble on the russet one.

XVI

MINGULAY OF THE BIRDS

THE SCENIC GRANDEUR OF THE BARRA ISLES

BETWEEN Pabbay and the Island of Berneray (which is the southernmost link in the chain of greater and lesser islands stretching, like a mighty breakwater, a total distance of roughly a hundred and twenty-five miles from the Butt of Lewis in the north to Barra Head in the south, and known collectively as the Outer Hebrides) “lyes ane ile callit Megaly, twa myle lange, inhabit and weill manurit, guid for fischeing and corne, pertaining to the bishop of the iles.”

On the north and south Mingulay is separated from the Islands of Pabbay and Berneray by the Sound of Mingulay and the Sound of Berneray. The Sound of Pabbay is the term applied to the channel dividing that Island on the north and east from Sandray. Measured from the Barnacle Rock to Sloc Glamarigeo or to the Hoe, Mingulay is distant from Pabbay about one and a half statute miles: the Sound of Berneray, on the other hand, falls slightly short of half a mile in breadth when estimated from the Geirum Mor, in the south-south-west of Mingulay, to the riven rocks that impinge upon the wild shore of Berneray, and are situate far below and to the northward of Barra Head Lighthouse. From the nearest point of the Island of Barra, Mingulay is removed some nine miles to the south-south-west.

With the exception of Barra and Vatersay, Mingulay is by far the largest island of the group generally referred to as the Barra Isles.

“ A Chappell in every Ile ”

The extreme length of Mingulay is two and a half miles : its maximum breadth from east to west is about a mile and three-quarters. On the west side its cliffs rise precipitously above sea-level to a height of seven or eight hundred feet. Carnan (Biolacreag), the loftiest eminence in the Island, reaches an altitude of 891 feet above the level of the sea. The two other hills in Mingulay—to wit, MacPhee’s Hill toward the north, and Hecla toward the south-east—attain the height of 735 and 700 feet respectively.

Of the early history of Mingulay, and indeed of all the Barra Isles excepting Barra itself, we possess very little reliable information. We know, however, that in common with its neighbours it had an ancient place of worship. Dean Monro, who in 1594 travelled through most of the Outer Hebrides on a tour of inspection in his capacity as High Dean of the Isles, bears this out in his remarks about Vatersay, which he concludes by mentioning that “ all thir nine iles forsaide (of which Mingulay is one) had a chappell in every ile.”

The Fate of a Sixth Sheep

About a century after Dean Monro’s visit, Martin Martin, Gent., compiled his valuable *Description of the Western Islands of Scotland* (1695). In this work the Island of Mingulay receives scant attention. Apart from noting



KITTIWAKES AND GUILLEMOTS ON THE ROCKS OF THE BARRA ISLES.

(Photo by Robert M. Adam.)

that Mingulay formed one of the group of islands lying near to the south of Barra and commonly designated the Bishop's Isles, Martin supplies us with very little information. While describing Pabbay Isle, he makes the following passing comment on Mingulay: "There is a little island not far from this called Micklay, of the same extent as Pabbay, and hath the same way of feeding sheep. These little islands afford excellent hawks."

The reference to the sheep was the observation that, if six of these quadrupeds were put to graze on the Island of Pabbay, five of them continued to appear fat, whereas the sixth remained a poor skeleton—"while any number in this island not exceeding five are always very fat."

In olden times the natives used to place their sheep for grazing purposes on the luxuriant pastures covering the tops of the precipitous and shoreless rocks in this locality by scaling the face of the least formidable cliff at great personal risk, and then hauling up their wedders from a boat immediately below by means of a rope. The same expedient was adopted when sheep were being removed from these isolated skerries.

Change in Climatic Conditions

To-day the Island of Mingulay is uninhabited by the human species, though occasionally a shepherd attends there to inspect the flock of sheep pastured upon it. That during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Mingulay supported a fair population is a well-established fact. "Fertile in corn and "grass is the description of Mingulay given in the *Old Statistical Account*, compiled towards the close of the eighteenth century. Sixteen years after the

appearance of the *New Statistical Account* (1861) Mingulay carried a population of 139. By the year 1881 this number had risen to 150, 146 of which were Gaelic-speaking.

At that time there were seventy-two persons residing on Berneray, including the lighthouse keepers, from whom passing vessels could obtain a few black cattle and sheep, and fresh and salted fish—the latter generally in considerable quantities.

Though devoted mostly to pasturage, a considerable part of the Island consisted of arable land, on which the inhabitants raised quantities of cereals and vegetables for their own consumption. Lobster fishermen have told me that on Mingulay were grown the best potatoes in the Long Island. The decline in population, culminating a few years ago in the abandonment of Mingulay as a place of human habitation, was brought about by a variety of causes, not the least significant of which have been change in climatic conditions prevailing in the Hebrides generally, and the consequent hardships experienced by the crofter-fisherman in providing the bare necessities of life for himself and his dependants. With more than decreasing returns from his croft had he to contend : in addition, the steady decay of the line-fishing industry robbed him of a once lucrative alternative to crofting.

The Remoteness of Mingulay

Long spells of inclement weather, and inaccessibility during the not infrequent storms experienced in the Outer Isles, contributed toward making existence on Mingulay the more uncongenial. Even in good weather the powerful currents racing between the Barra Isles often render a

landing impossible, or possible only at great hazard. Although of a rugged nature, the eastern shore is less steep than the west, since the east side of the Island slopes more gradually from the summit of the hills. About the centre of the eastern shore is Mingulay Bay, a semi-circular inlet with a sandy beach, a short distance back from which was the clachan that in 1881 housed the hundred and fifty souls aforementioned. Though unprotected from the south-west swell, good anchorage is to be had off this sandy bay in from ten to nine fathoms with west and north-westerly winds. But the best place for landing on Mingulay is at Skipisdale, on the south-east of the Island. I have sailed to Mingulay under what one might consider ideal conditions, only to discover on arriving there that it was almost impossible to effect a landing with any degree of safety. Quite recently I endeavoured to disembark at the wonted landing-place in Mingulay Bay, and was compelled to manœuvre for at least three hours before being able to make the point without incurring the risk of having the boat smashed in splinters on the jagged rocks. The sky overhead was clear and sunny, and there was scarcely a breath of wind. Nevertheless, the swell was so great and the current so strong that it was wellnigh out of the question for one person to attend to the sail and tiller at the same time, and expect to make the landing-place in safety, except by good fortune. Had there been another person in the boat, who could have been on the alert either at the bow or at the tiller, a landing certainly would have been effected more readily, and, certainly, with less risk.

The Decay of Line Fishing

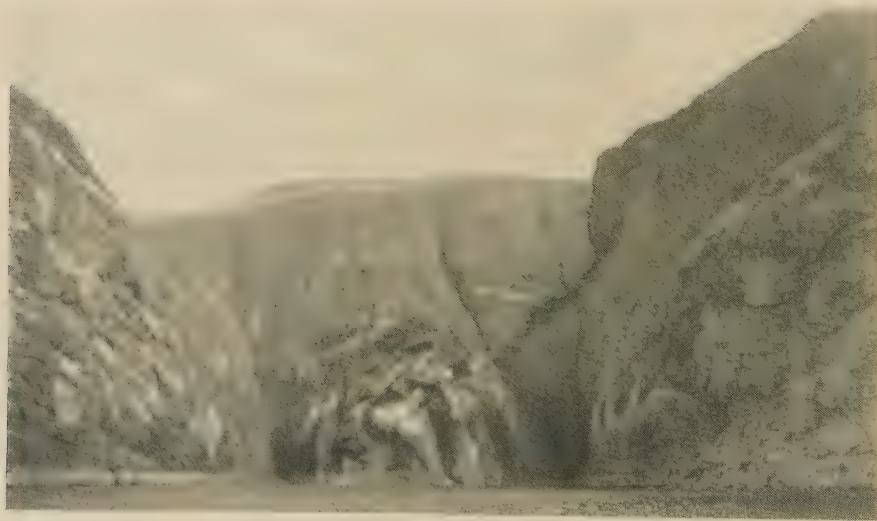
With the almost complete disappearance of line fishing as a source of livelihood in many districts of the Western Isles, we need not concern ourselves at the moment beyond stating that, perhaps, the prime cause for the decadent condition of this occupation has been the indiscriminate manner in which trawlers have operated in the past—and continue to operate at the present time, though to a lesser degree on account of the stricter vigilance kept upon them—within the territorial limits, thus ruining the spawning beds and destroying millions and millions of immature fish. The evil effects of illegal trawling in the waters of the Western Highlands and Islands are too patent to admit of controversy; and the damage committed cannot be too seriously stressed.

Myriads of Sea-birds

The Islands of Mingulay and Berneray are the resort of innumerable sea-fowl. Words fail utterly, when an attempt is made to describe to the reader the grandeur and magnitude of the stupendous mural cliffs of Mingulay, and the numberlessness of the sea-birds that have their dwelling-place among them. In the early springtime these downy creatures begin to return to their accustomed haunts among the Barra Isles. For days and days on end they are busily engaged in cleaning out their old nesting-places, and in removing from the ledges and crannies the débris of the previous year's visit. Thereafter they fly away, making only a cursory call at Mingulay now and again. Toward the end of April or the beginning of May they return in



SEA CAVES, ISLE OF MINGULAY.



SEA CAVES AND CLIFFS ON THE WEST SIDE OF THE ISLE OF MINGULAY.

myriads to lay their eggs on the ledges of the rocks, and to hatch their young. So close to one another do they sit that thousands of nests must actually overlap one another. How each hen can distinguish her own nest amid such a welter of nests and eggs must always remain a mystery to any one who has had the privilege of crawling snake-wise to the edge of the precipice in order to look down upon the tiers of nests that smother the cliffs almost to high-tide level, hundreds of feet below.

Like Millions of Eggcups

Viewed from within a few hundred yards of the Atlantic side, the cliffs of Mingulay are white with birds. Tiers upon tiers of ledges and crannies are discernible only by the rows of aquatic fowls sitting or standing four and five deep upon them. Perched on the shelves of the rocks, they remind one of countless files of troops on review, some standing at ease, others erect and at attention. So besieged are the cliffs of Mingulay with puffins, guillemots, razor-bills, cormorants, kittiwakes, and lesser sea-birds that one would deem it impossible to insert a thin sheet of notepaper between any two birds. Each tribe strives to reserve definite portions of the cliffs for the use of its own members. Here you may have a clan of guillemots : a bevy of puffins may have taken possession of the tiers above : to a series of ledges in the amphitheatre below a group of cormorants may have established a claim by prescriptive title.

Where Photography fails

In respect of the bird life inhabiting their sheer rock faces during the months of June and July, the Islands of Mingulay and Berneray can have no serious rival in this country. St. Kilda may be the retreat of a greater variety of birds ; but one feels reluctant to confess that its cliffs are any grander or more awe-inspiring than the cliffs of Mingulay. And, were Mingulay to be approached as easily as either Staffa or St. Kilda, I have not the slightest doubt that its cliffs would be just as renowned. St. Kilda is less isolated than Mingulay in so far as the *Hebrides* and the *Dunara Castle* call there during the summer months. If Castlebay were situated within easy distance of the great centres of population, and reached by a railway, an enterprising company might be floated for the sole purpose of conducting tourists to the mural cliffs of Berneray and Mingulay.

Very few people can have any conception of the magnitude and magnificence of these cliffs, or of the myriads of birds dwelling among the more southerly of the Barra Isles. One gets some idea of the tremendous rock faces of Mingulay from a point just a little below Barra Head Lighthouse, on the Island of Berneray. Viewed from Berneray under favourable atmospheric conditions, the caverns and fissures of Mingulay stand out with extraordinary clearness, considering that at this spot the Sound of Berneray is nearly a mile in width. This is the place from which the Geirum Mór and the Geirum Beag may be seen to advantage.

Despite the enormous advances that in recent years have been made in the art of the camera, photography

cannot yet comprehend the extent of the cliff scenery of the Barra Isles. If the photographer get too near to the cliffs, he sacrifices altitude and proportion ; if he should move seaward he may obtain breadth and depth, but then he begins to lose that sense of magnitude which only a panorama taken at close quarters can illustrate adequately.

The Courageous " Mr. Gingich "

On the west coast of Mingulay, and insulated by a narrow strait, is the rocky islet of Lianamull, which likewise is the sanctuary of myriads of guillemots, puffins, coulternebs, and kindred sea-birds that lay their eggs and hatch their young upon it.

Martin refers to this islet as " the rock Linmull." He describes it as being about half a mile in circumference, indifferently high, " and almost inaccessible, except in one place, and that is by climbing, which is very difficult." In Martin's day the chief climber was designated " Gingich," a term connoting a man of strength and proportionate courage. When a fowling party arrived at Mingulay or Lianamull and desired to disembark at some dangerous spot, " Mr. Gingich jumps out first upon a stone on the rock-side, and then, by the assistance of a rope of horse-hair, he draws his fellows out of the boat upon this high rock, and draws the rest up after him with the rope, till they all arrive at the top, where they purchase a considerable quantity of fowls and eggs." On returning to the boat, " Mr. Gingich " was expected to be the first to leap into it again, in order to assist his fellows, at whatever personal hazard, in embarking with their ladings of fowls, eggs, and feathers.

In the days when the Islands of Mingulay and Berneray carried a fair population, the natives were as skilled "rockers" as are the St. Kildans at the present time. And, though the inhabitants of these Isles found themselves unable to collect sufficient quantities of birds' feathers to send to a public market, such feathers as they had collected were disposed of locally—probably in Castlebay—at the rate of 6*d.* per lb. In Barra I have slept on mattresses and pillows filled with Mingulay feathers.

The Sea-caves of Mingulay

My last visit to the Isles of Mingulay and Berneray was made with Donald MacAulay, until lately the relieving officer for Barra Head Lighthouse, and unquestionably one of the most interesting and intellectual men to be found throughout the entire length and breadth of the Western Isles. Our arrival off the sea-caves of Mingulay was occasion for much noise and confusion among the millions of birds nesting on the cliffs at the time. Their scouts had dispatched the fiery-cross of danger with almost incredible rapidity long before we had come in sight of their retreat. On drawing nearer, MacAulay discharged a shot into the air from a gun we carried on board, whereat the sky became darkened by tens of thousands of puffins and guillemots, and razor-bills and cormorants flying hither and thither in every direction, but exhibiting no desire to be long absent from the cliffs from which they had been so rudely startled. No doubt they were anxious to return to their eggs.

On the tangled skerries about us, sleeky seals lazed with apparent unconcern—though they quietly slithered

into the water when they imagined that we were getting within range of them.

The sea was so tranquil on this occasion that we slanted the mast and steered our boat into one of the innumerable sea-caves of Mingulay. This maritime grotto was lofty within, and silent to an uncanny degree. For all that, there was an air of faeryland about it. Mystically draped in deep greens and blues and purples, it was faintly illumined by just the merest flicker of sunlight here, and a pale shimmer of phosphorescence there. The glowing faery-lights of this cavern were strangely reminiscent of the water that, "like a witch's oils, burned green and blue and white" as a result of the ancient mariner's having inhospitably killed the pious albatross of good omen. This, verily, was a cave of enchantment, as I was more than assured on realising that, in order to get out to the Atlantic again, it was not necessary for us to sail back to the lofty arched entrance by which we had gained ingress some minutes earlier.

If water-sprites exist among the Barra Isles—and we have every reason to suppose that they do exist—they are certain to be familiar with the sea-caves of Mingulay!

XVII

TALES OF MINGULAY

OCEAN OF THE SPECTRE

SIXTY years ago there lived on the Isle of Mingulay an old man of great acumen and prodigious physical strength. He had spent the greater part of his life upon the sea-cliffs of his native isle in pursuit of wild-fowl: than Ruairi MacNeil, otherwise known as Roderic, Son of Donald, there was no more expert "rocker" in all the Barra Isles. Even when over ninety years of age he thought nothing of dangling by his finger-tips from a rocky precipice hundreds of feet sheer above the sea.

In strength and stature Roderic MacNeil had only one serious competitor in the Southern Hebrides; and that competitor was none other than Pàdrraig Mór, the Barra giant. Pàdrraig lived on Berneray. Furth of the Barra Isles he was known as Gille Mór Bharraidh, Big Lad of Barra.

It was at the hands of Roderic MacNeil and of such as he that many a stranger and shipwrecked seaman received hospitality—among them Alexander Carmichael, and John Francis Campbell (commonly referred to as "Campbell of Islay"), who visited Mingulay together in 1871. Roderic, Son of Donald, was in his ninety-second year at that time; and Carmichael informs us that he had never tasted tea, and that he had never experienced a day's illness in his

life. Nor had his feet ever known a pair of shoes. His chest was as rotund as a barrel, and measured forty-eight inches in girth.

It was Ruairi MacNeil who, around his peat fire in Mingulay, would be telling weird and creepy stories of the Barra Isles, keeping his listeners enthralled into the small hours, for he was endowed with the "second-sight," and the eloquence of the seannachie forby.

But it's long since Ruairi, Son of Donald, went the way of all flesh.

Over the Sound of Vatersay

In his day the population of Mingulay was roughly a hundred and fifty souls. To-day Mingulay is unpeopled ; and so there remains a mere handful of old folks who are able to tell us anything whatsoever of pristine conditions there.

The few legendary fragments relating to Mingulay that I possess were gleaned from one Seumas MacKinnon, the grazings constable of Ben Tangval, who resides at Kentangval, and also from his much-respected kinsfolk, the MacLeans, who about seventeen years ago left Mingulay to take up their abode at Caolis, in the Isle of Vatersay. One fine day (as already related) Seumas and I decided to go ceilidhing on his uncle and aunt at Caolis, in the hope that, for my special edification, he might elicit from them some old tales about the Isle of Mingulay. So we took the bridle-path threading among the crofts on the south side of Loch Kentangval, and lingered round under Ben Tangval until we came down to the shore of the Sound of Vatersay at a point directly opposite the township of Caolis.

There Seumas delivered himself of a shrill, piercing whistle, and by secret legerdemain indicated to some one unseen that a boat ought to be sent across for us without delay. The Sound of Vatersay was glittering in the afternoon sunshine at the time ; and the strong criss-cross currents of broken and eddying water, swirling through from the Atlantean seaboard in series of miniature maelstroms, gave this channel the semblance of a great, undulating surface wrought in mosaic, or bestrewn with a million dazzling spangles of Oriental hue.

Hospitality at Caolis

Ere long a small rowing-boat was making its way toward us against currents that continued to increase in velocity with the rising of the tide. On getting into the boat, which was a fairly unwieldy one, Seumas and I each lent a hand at the oars, and in the matter of a few minutes found ourselves on the white, shelly margin of the sea, hard by the township of Caolis. A short meandering along a grassy cart-track brought us to the threshold of the MacLeans. We entered the house without any ceremony whatever, rejoiced in the glowing welcome of one of the tidiest hearths I have ever beheld, and partook of that repast which is the traditional prerogative of every wanderer among the Isles, even though he be less than half a mile from his own fireside.

Soon our thoughts were diverted toward the more southerly of the Barra Isles ; and here are one or two of the stories of Mingulay that I heard at Caolis, in the Isle of Vatersay.

MacNeil's Steward

Once upon a time a certain chief of the MacNeils of Barra sent a steward named MacPhee to Mingulay for the purpose of collecting the rents due by his tenants there. At this period it was customary to have in the centre of every boat going any considerable distance a peat fire in a three-legged pot, so that, in the event of accident or delay by contrary winds and tides, food might be prepared at sea.

On account of the difficulty usually experienced in effecting a landing on Mingulay, on arrival there only MacPhee disembarked. The crew remained aboard to keep the boat a little offshore until he returned. When MacPhee reached the dwellings of MacNeil's tenants, he was horror-stricken at finding all the inhabitants of Mingulay dead in their houses, as though some terrible catastrophe had overtaken them. He immediately fled back to the boat to summon assistance ; but the crew, suspecting from what he said that the people of the Island must have perished of plague, refused to come sufficiently close to the shore again as would enable MacPhee to enter the boat, for it was feared that he might be carrying infection. And so, after having thrown out a smouldering peat to him that he might be able to kindle a fire, the crew set sail for Castlebay with the gruesome tidings that on Mingulay MacPhee had found not a living soul. It was explained that the steward had been left behind for fear of his smitting the natives of Barra with the plague that they surmised to have visited that Island, and to have wiped out its population.

MacNeil's Offer to MacPhee

Now MacPhee lived in a hollow place under MacPhee's Hill, an eminence rising to an altitude not quite that of Arthur's Seat. And this hollow place is still known as *Leabaidh Mhic a' Phee*, the Couch of MacPhee. Tradition urges that MacPhee buried all the dead of Mingulay, and attended to its ownerless cattle.

When MacNeil of Barra thought that all likelihood of infection was over, he dispatched a boat to bring MacPhee home to Castlebay. Eventually he offered the Island of Mingulay to him on condition that he agreed to return thither and settle down. MacPhee expressed his willingness to accept the Chief's offer if two MacNeils were prepared to settle on Mingulay with him. And I was told this weird story at Caolis in Vatersay, and by Mrs. MacLean herself, who, now an elderly woman, is a direct descendant of one of the two MacNeils who volunteered to rehabilitate Mingulay along with MacPhee.

Barra and Ireland

Long before the MacNeil Chiefs evacuated Kisimul Castle to take up residence on the northern peninsula of Barra (Eoligarry), the following tale was prevalent in Mingulay, and indeed throughout the Barra Isles. In the days before local girls were engaged so extensively during the fishing seasons at Castlebay and similar curing ports, it was customary for Barra girls to seek domestic employment in Ireland. I already have indicated in this volume that there used to be a continuous coming and going

between Barra and Erin. Irish cargo boats, carrying seed potatoes and the like, frequently called at Castlebay (as they do to a lesser extent to-day) ; and the captains of these vessels usually were willing to convey over to Erin such *bona fide* islanders as were eager to go into service in that country. As these Irish boats called at intervals as regular as sailing conditions permitted, girls, who intended seeking their fortune furth of the Hebrides, usually had some idea when one might be expected in the Minch.

Now a girl belonging to the Isle of Pabbay and another from Mingulay had planned secretly that they would avail themselves of the first opportunity offered of going over to Erin. One day, while the Mingulay girl was in the act of lifting a creel of peats on her back, she beheld a strange man standing in front of her. How he had come to Mingulay without her knowing it was a mystery to her. She passed the time of day with him ; and in the course of a brief conversation he referred to the voyage to Erin contemplated by herself and her Pabbay companion. He prognosticated that, while *she* would settle contentedly in her new surroundings, her Pabbay friend would die in Ireland of fever.

Ocean of the Spectre

While in the act of speaking to the stranger, the Mingulay girl chanced to observe a sailing-vessel some miles off the coast. In a trice this vessel capsized ; and all its occupants were precipitated into the sea. Screaming with shock, she strove to draw the stranger's attention to the scene of the fatality. But he assured her that the accident she had just witnessed had no application whatsoever to people contemporaneous with her—the grand-

parents of those thrown into the sea were not yet born, he added.

When the girl went home with her creel of peats, she told her people of the interview with a man unknown to her, and of the weird apparition she had beheld. And on the locality, in which she declared the incident to have taken place, her people put the name of *Cuan a' Bhòchdain*, Ocean of the Spectre.

About thirty years ago a small fishing-boat capsized in this vicinity, and all hands perished.

Concealed under the Thatch

While stationed in Northern Ireland, a soldier belonging to Barra, and widely known as the Pearsanach Mór (literally, "the big person"), deserted the army. In the course of his flight he came to a cottage that was being rethatched. Upon entering he told the *bean-an-tighe*—the housewife—that he was a native of the Isle of Barra, and confessed to being a military deserter. He pled with her to conceal him, since the military police were hot in pursuit of him. The goodwife hastened out to her husband, who at the time was busy with the thatching of his cottage. As the result of a brief consultation with him, it was decided that the Pearsanach Mór would be concealed under the thatch until the scare was over.

Barely a minute was the deserter under the thatch when armed men rode up to the cottage, and inquired of the thatcher whether he had noticed a fugitive pass by. To this interrogation they received a reply in the negative. So they sped on in the direction in which they imagined the deserter to have gone; and, on reaching the point

beyond which they knew no human being could have fled in so short a time, they returned to the cottage and insisted on searching it. House, byre, stable, loft were ransacked ; but no deserter did they find. Whereupon they gave up the pursuit, and returned to barracks.

The Spectre recalled

Toward the evening of the same day, the husband opened up the thatch and extricated the Pearsanach Mór. Now the goodwife did a certain amount of weaving in her spare moments ; and her brother-in-law was a tailor. So between them they made him a new suit to displace his discarded uniform.

And it was while the Pearsanach Mór sojourned at this cottage in Northern Ireland that he learnt of his hostess that it was she who, as a girl, had seen in the Ocean of the Spectre the extraordinary apparition of which he had heard tell in his boyhood days. She declared to him that the foretellings of the stranger, who confronted her when creeling peats in Mingulay, had come true—she was settled happily in Ireland, and her Pabbay companion had died of fever years before.

As I have just related, it is only a few decades since the final part of the prophecy was witnessed in the loss in *Cuan a' Bhòchdain* of a fishing-boat with all hands.

And the folks of the Barra Isles affirm that the occupants of this boat were the great-grandchildren of a family once living in Mingulay, whose unborn posterity was associated with the accident at the time of its spectral happening.

Truly, this is a tale of the “ second-sight.”

XVIII

HEBRIDEAN MEMORIES

KENTANGVAL IN JULY—A BARRA GRAZINGS CONSTABLE

It was in a house on the verge of the road at Kentangval, close to the Loch of the same name and the point where the same road curves through a few degrees, that I tarried for the better part of one of the most glorious summers in my existence. Between twilights I shared an attic of that house with a tall, shy fellow, who hailed from the east coast, and coopered barrels all day long on one of the several curing stations distributed around Castle Bay, thus adding his quota of noise and activity to the business-like atmosphere pervading the port of Barra in the zenith of summer.

To the best of my recollection, only twice in broad daylight did I actually see my attic-mate in the flesh, albeit my sojourn at Marion MacKinnon's extended over some weeks. If my memory serve me accurately, the first occasion of our day-time meeting was on one of his Saturday half-holidays, when by some inadvertence I did not happen to be out with a boat, or cycling along the ridges of hardened sand and shell characterising the Great Cockle Shore of Barra.

The Attic in Candlelight

I now suddenly recall my attic-mate's name. It was Runcie. I can visualise it scrawled upon a rain-smudged

and weathered label attached to his kist. And I am hoping that, should Runcie's eyes ever chance to light upon these pages, he will have no objection to my having brought him into public prominence in this harmless fashion.

Well, Runcie was a genial sort of fellow—though, as I have just confessed, I only set eyes on him twice in daylight. Our acquaintance with one another consisted mainly of odd hours by candlelight, or in total darkness such as covered the land of Egypt in Moses' time. Runcie's bed was tucked in under the south roof of the attic; mine occupied a corresponding position under the north roof. A few feet of "no man's land," devoid of shell-holes and barbed wire entanglements, lay between us for some nights. Neither of us dared sneak across in the darkness to grope for the candle that stood by the bedside of the earlier bedder. We never ascended attic-wise simultaneously; and seldom was the same lodger first abed two nights in succession.

Ceilidhing at MacDonalds'

Runcie, however, usually scored in deriving his money's worth out of Marion MacKinnon's candles. The never-ending ceilidhs down in MacDonalds', at the Pier House in Castlebay, were responsible for the erratic hours I observed during most of my stay in Barra that summer. Tea and talk—aye, and even arguments—were the chief features of MacDonalds' after sundown. And the only man whose views coincided in the least degree with my own was a certain fishery officer who exhibited both common sense and a sense of humour! Indeed, it was a pity for the minority that it had not the support of a young fish-salesman named Isaac Wallace, whom I met at Mac-

Donalds' a year or two previously. When Isaac differed in argument with an opponent, whom every one knew to be talking bosh, he would disarm him by repeating what a Nairn teacher used to say to the stupid pupils in his class : " 'Way home and tell your mother to give you haddies for brains ! " Isaac had a weakness of which he was aware. It was that of confuting or pooh-poohing, for days on end, everything he heard or was told. Then, suddenly coming to his senses, and realising how pleasantly disagreeable he had been to those who lodged with him, he would laugh for hours at himself.

A Perpetual Jangle

One beautiful afternoon I accompanied Isaac and MacRae, a young banker at Castlebay, to the Isle of Vatersay. Isaac and MacRae went to shoot rabbits for Sunday's dinner : I went to lift photographs. Coming from Nairn, and having been associated with the sea and seafaring people all his days, Isaac knew everything that was to be known about the sailing of a boat. MacRae, on the other hand, belonged to Kintail ; and, having come in contact with gamekeepers and gillies and the " sporting gentry," he knew everything that was to be known about a shotgun, and the precautionary measures one should adopt when carrying firearms.

On our way over to Vatersay, MacRae trounced poor Isaac most mercilessly about the careless manner in which he carried and treated his gun. At one moment the muzzle was pointing directly toward one or other of us : at another, the gun was sliding down into the water under the footboards. MacRae was determined that, on reach-



THE VILLAGE OF MINGULAY AS IT WAS IN THE SUMMER OF 1905.

(Photo by Robert M. Adam.)



RUINS OF THE SAME VILLAGE IN 1922, SEVENTEEN YEARS LATER.

(Photo by Robert M. Adam.)

ing Vatersay, he would supervise our disembarkation, lest Isaac stumbled with his cartridges and discharged his barrels. Everything went well on Vatersay until we were nearing the Bagh Siar, when Isaac's gun, which he carried under his oter, fired accidentally. When asked what he was "playing at," Isaac excused himself by replying that he just did it "for fun." "For fun!" repeated MacRae; and you may guess some of the other phrases that followed! The fact of the matter was that Isaac could not offer the slightest explanation of how it had happened, though he feigned to exhibit the utmost unconcern about the whole incident. Here was MacRae's opportunity for calling him by every evil name to which he could lay his tongue.

However, when sailing to Castlebay in the evening, Isaac got his own back on MacRae, who knew not the first thing about the management of a lugsail, and who, when given something to do, invariably had the tackle all higgledy-piggledy, the tiller in the diametrical position, and the sheet on the wrong side of the mast. When we returned to the Pier House with a dozen rabbits, all these incidents had to be rehearsed for the benefit of the family, which found difficulty in knowing how much to believe.

Every one at the Pier House was kind and congenial. Isaac was a charitable fellow in every way. I am not exaggerating when I tell you that he has been known to take the coat off his back to put it on a man whom he had reason to believe did not possess one.

Our Nocturnal Dialogues

When at length I strolled home to Kentangval in the summer twilight, as often as not Runcie was in bed, reading

by candlelight some foul literature of the penny-dreadful order. His insatiable appetite for "thrillers," coupled with the fact that he had to be at his work an hour or two before it was usual for me to be as much as opening an eyelid, urged him to retire at a respectable hour except on Saturday nights. In the absence of candlelight, two other cognate indications had I that Runcie was in bed, although I could not see him. These were the smell of tobacco smoke and the crimson glow of a cigarette. Runcie was addicted slightly to that nauseating habit, so prevalent among young men (and women !), of having a few puffs in bed.

I told you earlier that my attic-mate was tall. It runs vaguely in my mind that, while he was in the act of dressing one morning, I happened to open a furtive eye to find that he actually had his head out of the skylight when adjusting his collar and tie. This must have been on a Sunday morning, as he wore neither collar nor tie to his work. And, in any case, why should one ? Never will I understand why we squander so much of our limited lives in putting on raiment and taking it off, and in preparing and consuming food and drink !

From my conversations with Runcie, in this darkened attic at Kentangval, I derived a certain amount of knowledge. For instance, he enlightened me on various observances and usages connected with his work as a cooper, and described such practices as the method of confirming the engagement of women and girls as gutters, etc., by the payment of arles or earnest money. Gradually we extended the scope of our conversation from arles to wages, and concluded our nocturnal dialogues with disquisitions on amateur photography.

A Wee, Thatched Housie

It was while staying at Marion MacKinnon's that I also made the acquaintance of her cousin, Seumas MacKinnon, to whom I have made frequent references throughout this volume. And, maybe, I should be telling you, while I have the mind for it, that Marion is a grand baker of oatcakes, and sister-in-law to the Sgoilear Bà, who is reputed to be an authority on theoretical navigation.

Seumas lives in a wee, thatched housie a few yards farther along the road. And it was while reclining among the clover and the long luscious grass in a field at Kentangval, the day following upon my arrival in the village, that Seumas crept over to me with the object of making the acquaintance of the stranger to Kentangval. From his conversation I was not long in discovering that he had had a chequered career. He had gone to Canada under an emigration scheme, but had found conditions there so distasteful to him that he insisted on being sent back to Barra. And back to Barra he was sent ! As our crack began to wax in interest, Seumas proffered a plausible excuse that he would have to be going round to the back of the croft for the purpose of tethering the cow on a patch of fresh pasture. The cow supplied a somewhat similar excuse on the evening of the succeeding day—she had to be milked ; and, sure enough, it was none other than Seumas who was accustomed to do the milking.

A Teller of Tales

As time went on, Seumas outgrew his native shyness and reserve. A suggestion that he should assist me in

finding my way over to the Isle of Vatersay inveigled him into confessing that he had an uncle and aunt at Caolis, in Vatersay, whom he might be going over to visit any day. I went over to Vatersay with him on more than one occasion, as related elsewhere. My first excursion with him readily confirmed my suspicion that, from the viewpoint of hearing legends and traditions of the Barra Isles, I accidentally had come in contact with a man who could supply me with as much as I cared to record. And here let it be said that to Seumas MacKinnon, Kentangval, Isle of Barra, is due the credit for the best yarns included in this book. Seumas takes great pride in his tales and fragments of old songs. In course of a recent confabulation, and when not arguing about crofters' rights and shortcomings, he said to a member of the Land Court: "You'll be knowing, of course, that I'm a bit bardish myself."

Seumas, I feel certain, must have been born on the stroke of midnight, since he is endowed with the "second-sight" and the correlative faculty of narrating enigmatic tales. My summer hours spent with him, either in boats or on the Isle of Vatersay, or in lying half asleep among the long, sweet grass close to the gable of Marion MacKinnon's house, have made a lasting impression on my mind.

The Grazings Constable

By the way, I must not neglect to tell you that Seumas MacKinnon is the grazings constable of Ben Tangval. Many interesting details he has told me anent his duties and experiences as such; but my memory only serves to recall a few of them. To commence with, I learned that the



OLD EOLIGARRY HOUSE AND THE WHITE, SANDY ROAD THAT LEADS TO IT FROM THE GREAT COCKLE SHORE OF BARRA.

grazings constable is appointed (usually at the recommendation of the tenants of the township concerned) by the Land Court, in virtue of the powers conferred upon it by the *Small Landholders' (Scotland) Act*, 1911, when the persons interested in the common grazings of the township have failed to appoint a regulating body in terms of the *Crofters' Common Grazings Regulations Act* (1891). The appointment is tenable for three years at a time.

The duties of the grazings constable are multifarious. He acts as intermediary between the crofters and the Board of Agriculture. All correspondence connected with the agricultural management of the township is addressed to him ; and likewise he conducts, on behalf of the crofters, such correspondence as may arise between them and the Board. He regulates the common grazings in accordance with the wishes of the people, so far as these wishes are in compliance with the statutory conditions prescribed by the Board of Agriculture ; he is responsible for the full souming of the township ; he arranges for the taking up of vacant shares in the common grazings ; he is empowered to demand, when the souming is being made up, that all parties having rights in the common grazings gather their stock and deliver it up to him for counting ; it is his bounden duty to see that all sheep on the common grazings of his township are dipped in accordance with such orders as the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries may issue from time to time ; he supervises the burning of heather ; he is responsible for the maintenance and repair of the township roads, fences, dykes, dippers, etc. ; he is authorised generally to do everything requisite for the proper management of the common grazings with reference to the clearing of drains, water-courses, and ditches, and the

construction of new ones when necessary or desirable ; he sees to it that the sheep are removed from the arable land to the common grazings on dates fixed by his committee in the spring of each year, and that they are not permitted to return to the township lands before a date similarly determined upon ; he receives complaints with regard to the common grazings, and summons persons having a right in it to attend such meetings as may be convened in connection therewith ; and, should a quantity of seaweed be cast ashore, he regulates the gathering of it, and apportions it according to the size of the holdings under his supervision.

And for all his trouble the poor grazings constable is compensated at the rate of a few pence (usually sixpence) per pound of rent paid by the persons having rights in the common grazings.

Constable's Services dispensed with

While glancing through a Barraman's diary the other day, I came upon an entry made some sixteen years ago, illustrative of how precarious at that time was the office of grazings constable on the South Uist and Barra Estates. The entry is a verbatim copy of a letter addressed authoritatively to a Barra constable, apprising him of the unpleasant fact that his services in this capacity were no longer required. The communication runs as follows :

“ DEAR SIR :

“ At the request of Lady Gordon-Cathcart, I hereby give you notice that your Services as Township Constable will terminate at Whitsunday first. This course has been found necessary in view of the Insurance Bill which comes

into force shortly, and which compels employers and servants to pay Insurance. In your case Lady Cathcart would have to pay the sum of 17s. 4d. and you would have to pay 13s. per annum, which is nearly as much as the annual salary allowed you as Constable. So you will at once see that Her Ladyship has no alternative but to dispense with the Services of all the Constables.

“ Yours faithfully,

“ (signed).”

Distinguished by a Sports Jacket !

One Saturday afternoon, while on our way to Vatersay, Seumas MacKinnon and I chanced to pass within earshot of a meeting convened by the grazings constable of Kentangval. As a rule such meetings are held in the open air—perhaps by the gable of a house ; and the men and women of the township or townships involved, or interested in the question under discussion, make a point of being present to ventilate their views, or to lay before the grazings constable such grievances as they may have. “ High words ”—in the Gaelic, of course—were greatly in vogue at the meeting to which I refer. I believe the question in dispute was the liability for the maintenance and repair of a fence demarcating the arable land from the common grazings. I noted that, on this occasion, the grazings constable was distinguished from his fellow crofters by his wearing a sports jacket and a brand new cap ; and it’s Seumas MacKinnon, the grazings constable of Ben Tangval, who extracted a promise from me that I would make special reference in these pages to the sports jacket worn by the grazings constable of Kentangval !

A Destructive Bull

And this recalls to mind that, during a recent visit to Kentangval, Seumas coaxed me to draft a letter designed for those whom he described as "the figureheads" of the Board of Agriculture. The damage done to a fence by the bull belonging to his township, and supplied by the Board, resulted in the registering of a complaint by the township of Borge. Seumas's township never denied liability; but delay in repairing the damage committed by the bull had brought a sharp communication from the Board. Now Seumas had no difficulty in answering the Board to the effect that liability was admitted, and that immediate steps were being taken to repair the damage; but what he was particularly desirous of incorporating in his reply, and could not, was a harmless reminder that the damage done was the natural result of his township's having fed the bull so well, and kept him in such excellent fettle.

Eilidh's Private Enclosure

Seumas MacKinnon is an authority on the topographical lore of Kentangval and Ben Tangval; and he recounts many traditions connected with these districts. He will tell you, for instance, about Eilidh, daughter of the laird of Talisker. Eilidh was married to one of the MacNeil chiefs, but she and her husband pulled together so badly that MacNeil built a house of stone and mortar for her at Kentangval. And he pegged off, for her own private use, two acres of land adjoining this house. In time Eilidh, wearying of her seclusion, left Barra and returned to her kinsfolk at Talisker.

Traces of the foundations of Eilidh's house still are discernible, as also are evidences of the dyke marking off her enclosure. And to this day the Kentangval folks speak of the place where Eilidh lived as *a' phairc*, meaning simply "the park."

Crimson and Creamy Clover

I have heaps of other summer memories of Kentangval ; but, haply, you are bored by now with these diffuse anecdotes. Believe me, however, when I say that I have been diffuse on purpose. I could be telling you much about Neil MacKinnon and his beautiful boat and his "silent service" yarns, and about a sailing cruise with him to Vatersay, where our craft grounded on the sands, and I insisted on tossing up a coin to decide whether he would carry me ashore or I would carry him. Since Neil weighs much the better part of a ton, it was providential for me that the coin dropped on the thoft in my favour !

Sweet memories have I of Kentangval. I remember how, in the early summer morning, when the sun was stealing in through the skylight and the blue peat-reek curling heavenward from the fires newly "lifted" in the crofts at Nask, I used to peep out to forecast the weather, and devise some ploy to fit in with it. There, to the west of that skylight, the mists were rolling off Ben Tangval. Orosay and Muldoanich floated in a purple shadow to the east. In the foreground lay the clovered grass between the road and Loch Kentangval. Beyond lay the Loch itself, dazzling in the sunlight. And every morn a grey seal would be basking on the Sgeir a' Bhaigh—a tangle-sprent rock near the head of Loch Kentangval, visible

except at high water, and situated within speaking range of the crofts. To the south a wee bit of Watersay thrust itself into the opaline beauty of the morning sea ; and up into the southern welkin rose the spirit-haunted heights of Sandray Isle and Mingulay.

Kentangval in July is a place of long, luscious grass, of crimson and creamy clover, of sea-scented wind, and of corncrakes that croak all through the summer night.

XIX

CREELS AND CARTS

MODES OF CONVEYANCE IN BARRA

NOT a few lovers of the by-ways of Scotland will rejoice to learn that, as yet at any rate, the motor-car has not found its way to Blue Barra of the Pirates. This, unquestionably, is something to be grateful for! Other evidences of "civilisation," however, are not wanting. For instance, the ubiquitous middleman and broker have spread their ramifications to Barra; and it is long since barbed wire—that invention of the devil when there's a hurry on you—established itself here. Apart from the trouble and expense entailed in bringing a car on the *Cygnets* from Oban by Mull, Coll, and Tiree, it must be borne in mind that the secondary road by which the greater part of Barra is circumscribed is only about fourteen miles in circumference. This means that from the main village of Castlebay no place on the road is distant more than seven or eight miles. On the other hand, wheeled traffic to North Bay and Eoligarry, situated at the opposite end of the Island, usually selects the route round by the west side, though it is three or four miles longer than the route by Breivig and Ersary, on the east side. This is due to the facts that much of the former route is comparatively flat, and its surface considerably better.

From the road encircling the Island, a number of

cart-tracks branch off in diverse directions. One deviates at Cuier for Greian and Cliat ; and another, bearing landwards at Loch an Duin, leads to the heart of the great peat deposits in the Dark Glen of Barra. Still another cart-track breaks off at North Bay, and meanders indifferently until it merges into the sand and powdered shell of the Great Cockle Shore, ultimately emerging from this vast expanse to twist and curve among the rolling downs of Eoligarry.

Sea-borne Traffic

In the variety and picturesqueness of its modes of conveyance, Blue Barra of the Pirates excels the other islands of the Hebrides, there being no motor-car nor kindred means of transport to harass either man or beast. Both the situation and configuration of the Island necessarily demand a fair quantity of sea-borne traffic. Apart from the great fishing fleet operating in Hebridean waters from Castlebay, and the huge cargo vessels that in season come thither to load cured herrings and the like, or to unload supplies of coal both for domestic purposes and to replenish the bunkers of steam-drifters, the Barra Isles are populous with smaller craft of the wherry, lugsail, and rowing-boat types.

Considered from the point of view of sea-borne traffic, Barra has a further advantage in that no part of it is removed from the sea more than two or three miles. Thus commodities can be conveyed in small boats to within comparatively short distances of their ultimate destination.



CREELING AND CARTING PEATS IN THE DARK GLEN OF BARRA.

Carts and Creels

The internal transport of Barra is effected by carts, and ponies bearing creels or panniers. The islanders themselves move from place to place in carts, or on the backs of their sturdy garrons. Frequently a crofter will make the journey from Eoligarry or North Bay athwart the back of a pony in order to do some business in Castlebay. If an islander possessing a cart have a friend or relative arriving by the mail-steamer, he will meet him at the pier with his cart; and, when the Barra girls are making preparations for their annual excursion to the East Coast fishings, carts are trundling in and out of Castlebay all day long, conveying from the remoter parts of the Island either the intending excursionists or their personal belongings.

Ponies and creels are widely used in winning the fuel of the Barra people; and in summer one may count no fewer than fifty or sixty ponies engaged at one time in the creeling of the peats from the Dark Glen.

Herding on the Machar

Then Barra possesses a few traps. And, since these correspond to the limousines of the city, they are owned by the few inhabitants who may be described as better-to-do. In the village of Castlebay, for example, one occasionally sees the trap belonging to the manse at Cuier, or to the schoolmaster at Greian, or to the farmer at Eoligarry.

Most of the natives are excellent pedestrians, and some of them own ramshackle bicycles. Taking all things into consideration, the push-bicycle is the means of conveyance

to which the Island of Barra is best adapted. For this reason one may find a bicycle in many a queer place. Youths performing cycling "stunts" on the piers have tried the patience of not a few Highland piermasters. This is an offence of which the writer has been guilty on innumerable occasions. On the machar comprising the peninsula which terminates in Borge Point, young lads frequently herd their cows homeward at milking-time by cycling slowly behind them. So cropped in places is the bent that one can pedal across wide stretches of this machar with greater ease, comfort, and safety than on many a turnpike !

How a Chapel was built

All the methods of transport in vogue in Barra were employed in the building of the Roman Catholic chapel at Craigston. For a time this chapel was the only place of worship on the Island. It was erected last century on the site of an earlier edifice, which, I am told, was longer, narrower, and less elevated. In the collecting of building material for this chapel all the able-bodied men and boys of Barra worked assiduously. Between Craigston and the Great Cockle Shore boys were leading ponies all day long. These ponies carried panniers and creels, filled with sand and shells. The latter were kilned to supply lime. A small vessel with a cargo of slates and an additional consignment of lime unloaded at Castlebay. The whole of this cargo was conveyed a distance of about four miles to Craigston by ponies and creels. I have it on good authority that driftwood, which successive storms had thrown up on the Atlantic coast of Barra, constituted the only timber used in the joists and couplings of this chapel.

Simultaneously wherries came from Vatersay and Sandray at high water, and unloaded on the beach below Borge huge quantities of suitable stones, which had been collected on the Islands aforementioned. These stones were conveyed to the site of the chapel at Craigston in two carts, one belonging to the late Father MacDonald, and the other owned by a merchant in Castlebay. The natives of Barra appear to have lacked carts at this time.

Pedestrian and Equestrian

It is over at the Tràigh Mhór, or Great Shore, of Barra that one may see the whole panorama of Hebridean transport. At high tide you may observe a small boat under sail making for Bruernish or North Bay, or a coaster steaming northward in the direction of Eriskay and Uist. At low water, when the tide has receded some miles, leaving uncovered an immense expanse of hard sand and pulverised shell, you may see a cart or two taking a short-cut between Eoligarry and North Bay. Then, perhaps, the farmer at Eoligarry happens to be on the Great Cockle Shore with his pony and trap ; and, haply, a young boy may be leading home to the fuel-less peninsula of Kilbar a pony bearing a couple of creels of peats. The counterpart to the latter is a pony coming across the Great Shore from the succulent pastures of Eoligarry, smothered in a load of newly-mown hay.

Many a pedestrian traverses the Great Cockle Shore of Barra, when the tide is suitable ; and not seldom does an equestrian emerge out of the summer mirage of it, remindful of one who has journeyed on horseback from a far country, bringing with him tidings of joy or sorrow, of weal or woe.

XX

THE POETRY OF THE GREAT SHORE OF BARRA

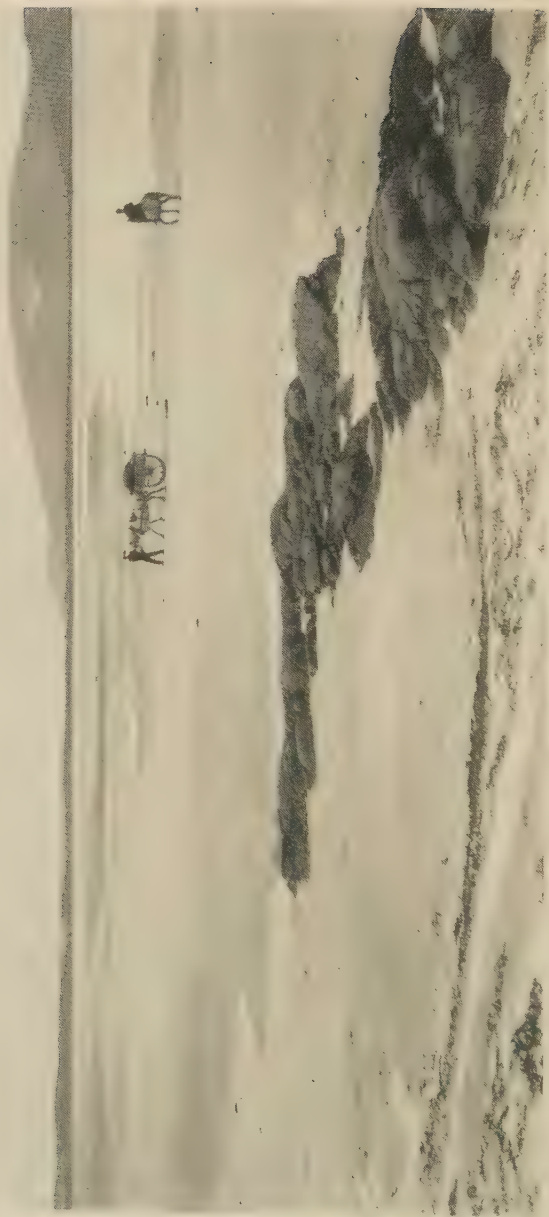
THE MAGIC OF DREAMLAND

IN the north of the Isle of Barra, and to the east of the isthmus connecting the peninsula of Eoligarry with the mainland of Barra, so to speak, stretch the renowned cockle-beds known as the Tràigh Mhór or "Great Shore" of Barra. Here it is that, twice during every rotation of the earth, a tremendous expanse of white sand and powdered shell, lying in low beaches, becomes dry land. The Tràigh Mhór forms part of the wide tidal inlet on the north-east of Barra which mariners term the Otter Vore (*Oitir Mhór*).

At slack water the maximum distance to which the spring tides recede from the grassy fringe of the isthmus aforementioned is roughly two and a half miles. To the north of the Sound of Orosay and the Island of the same name, the Tràigh Mhór is continued in a sandy expanse known as the Tràigh Cille-bharra. It was on the flat sands of the Tràigh Cille-bharra that aspiring equestrians competed at the annual *oda*, or sports, in times gone by.

An Olden Fording-place

To the northward, the Tràigh Cille-bharra narrows until Eoligarry House and Saltinish are past, whereafter



THE GREAT COCKLE SHORE (TRAIGH MHÓR) OF BARRA AT THE TURN OF THE TIDE. SOME CONCEPTION OF THE
MAGNITUDE OF THE GREAT SHORE MAY BE HAD WHEN IT IS REALISED THAT THE TINY SPECKS IN THE
DISTANCE ARE HUMAN WAYFARERS.

the shore again expands into a great sandy stretch terminating at Port an Lodain, the northernmost point of the Isle of Barra. This expanse is known as the Tràigh Scurrival.

At suitable water one may travel in a straight line across the Tràigh Mhór on foot, and in perfect safety and comfort, an aggregate of three miles on a sheen-white shore from a spot called Vaslan to the harbour below Eoligarra, passing through the Sound of Orosay, which is bone-dry at ebb tide.

That in recent times the Great Shore has made encroachments on the land is shown by the fact that near Vaslan the site of two abutting dwelling-places now lies about a hundred yards to the seaward of high-water mark, and is surrounded by green patches interspersed with sand and shells, and sea-pinks and fragments of sun-dried dulse.

The cart-track branching off the main Barra road at North Bay, and wriggling indifferently for nearly a couple of miles, merges into the shelly strand of the Tràigh Mhór near an old sheep-fank at Crannag, where the Great Shore has been forded for hundreds—aye, and perhaps for thousands—of years. In good weather and when the tides are suitable, there is endless coming and going across the great width of sand and broken shell lying between Crannag and Eoligarra, and forming part of one of the most productive cockle-beds in the world.

Like a Tribe of Nomads

By reason of the small-holdings lately settled at Eoligarra, Saltinish, and Scurrival by the Board of Agriculture, the Tràigh Mhór of Barra is busier to-day than it has been

for many a generation. In the summer-time carts are passing and repassing all day long at low water ; and many a pedestrian journeys upon this wonderful shore. Since there is no supply of peats in the Eoligarry peninsula, the crofters living in this neighbourhood are obliged to transport their fuel across the Great Shore from the mainland of Barra. They bring their peats all the way from the Dark Glen either in carts or in creels slung over the backs of their sturdy Highland ponies. A spell of fine weather in July or August induces the Hebridean crofter to labour earnestly at the peats ; and thus at this period of the year it is no unusual occurrence to find as many as twenty or thirty horses and carts, and ponies with creels, moving hither and thither across this great sandy stretch at one time. And in the heat of the noonday sun they appear afar off like a tribe of nomads trekking with their impedimenta across an Eastern desert.

Creels of Hay and Grass

The track which carts are compelled to use at high water branches inland a little at Crannag, leaving the mainland of Barra just by the sheep-fank already alluded to, and continuing in an uncertain fashion round the eastern shore of the isthmus connecting the Eoligarry peninsula with the rest of Barra. That a crofting community once thrived in this vicinity is demonstrated by the outlines of " lazy-beds," over which the winter storms now bestrew seawrack, shells, sand, pebbles, and kindred spoil of the tide that, through the Sound of Barra, sweeps in from the Minch before a north-east wind.

In addition to the passage of cart-loads of peats across

the Tràigh Mhór, ponies frequently convey toward Vaslan and Crannag creels of hay and grass from the primrosed pastures of Eoligarry. Other necessary supplies are borne across here too ; and there's a great deal of wayfaring on foot upon the Tràigh Mhór. And, then, the farmer at Eoligarry may be coming across with his pony and trap ; and occasionally one may discern a laddie making for Crannag on a rusty bicycle before the incoming of the tide. Many a time have I sped across the Great Shore between Crannag and Eoligarry on my bicycle, with the sea-wind whistling through the spokes of its wheels ; and many a drenching storm has overtaken me on the Tràigh Mhór of Barra, and made the vast cockle-beds around me one continuous sheet of fresh water flowing slowly seawards !

Earth on Troubled Waters

The journey between North Bay and Eoligarry is reduced considerably when it is possible to avail oneself of the Great Shore. Obviously, the farther in the tide happens to be, the nearer one is obliged to keep to Vaslan and the narrow isthmus separating the Tràigh Mhór from the Atlantic.

To an ancient Church and Chapel near the isthmus an early seventeenth-century chronicle gives the name of Kilmore. The Chapel, we are told, " lyeth on a verie pleasant grein ; " and " the Main seas (the Atlantic) and the seas next to Scotland (the Minch) are on everie syde. . . . "

The Chapel contained consecrated earth, a handful of which, on being cast into the sea in tempestuous weather, instantly pacified wind and wave. In the same document

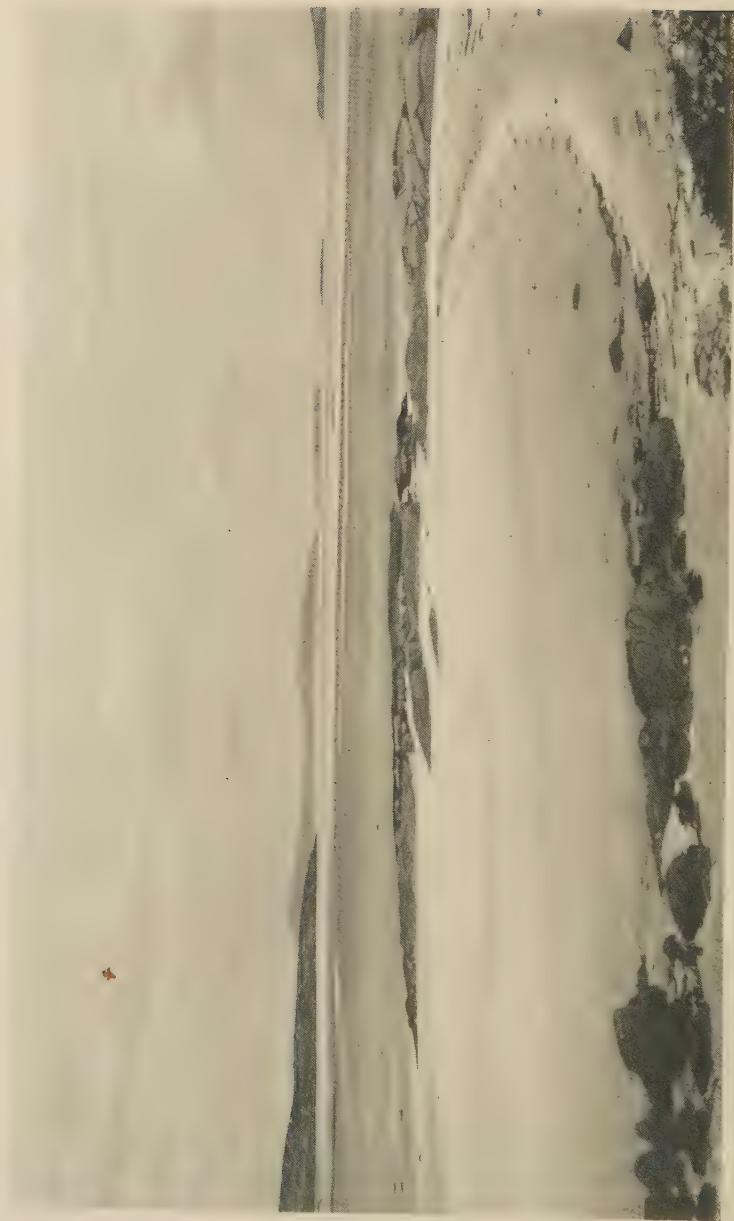
reference is made to the fact that, close to the Chapel of Kilmore, the two seas tend to "forgadder and meet with other," thus threatening to divide the Isle of Barra into two parts.

A Landmark for the Benighted

Vast expanses of the Tràigh Mhór may be cycled with comparative ease. Never does one require to alight except when an occasional shoal of soft sand is encountered. Nowhere will the wheels of a bicycle sink more than three inches; but, of course, very little sinking retards the progress of a bicycle. On the Eoligarry margin of the Tràigh Mhór ford is a belt of soft, dry sand, into which disappears the road that from Eoligarry House meanders unseen for a considerable distance among grassy slopes. Close at hand are two great posts between which, doubtless, there once existed a gate. These posts act as a landmark to any one far out on the Great Shore, because they give some indications of where exactly the road to Eoligarry is to be struck. About midway between Crannag and this spot, and situated almost in the centre of the Great Shore, is another post which likewise serves as a landmark to those who are befogged or benighted.

The Poetry of the Great Shore

Apart altogether from the cockles of the Tràigh Mhór (of which I shall be telling you a great deal in the next chapter), there is a thesaurus of poetry in the Great Shore of Barra. The most delightful time to go to Eoligarry is when the tide has ebbed so low that you can dawdle along



THE GREAT COCKLE SHORE OF BARRA, WITH PART OF FUDAY ON THE LEFT, ERISKAY AND THE STACK
ISLANDS IN THE CENTRE, AND THE NORTHERNMOST PART OF GIGHAY ON THE RIGHT.

by the edge of the sea, at least a couple of miles to the seaward of high-water mark, and reach the Isle of Orosay when colonies of sea-birds are searching for food among the dulse-covered rocks. Come here in summer, when there's a mirage above the white ridges of sand and comminuted shells, and you will behold a wondrous scene. If the tide be low, you may linger seaways to the margin of the brine that has scarcely a ripple on it. There you will be greeted by groups of birds, either dozing on their feet to the landward of the ebb, or wading in the shallow places. Conspicuous among them will be curlews, oystercatchers, gulls, terns, plovers, and surely the little *drilleachan*, or sandpiper, tripping along the shore with incredible swiftness and nimbleness—a feathered biped with something of the spirit divine about him. For me bird life seems to represent the purest ideal of the spirit incarnate, and the biological example nearest to the spirit disembodied. I have a deep-rooted affection for the little *drilleachan*; and I could recline among the wrack-sprent boulders of Orosay or Fuday for hours merely to be watching him, and to be wondering whence he came, and whither ultimately he will be going.

The Vastness of the Cockle-beds

Terrestrial silence and celestial peace are the dominant notes of the Great Shore of Barra, though there is much human wayfaring upon it. Perchance there may be two islanders going home across the Tràigh Mhór to Eoligarry or to Saltinish. And you cannot hear their coming: so silent are they in their treading on the sandy track leading to the fording-place at Crannag. It may be some time

before you will be seeing them, though intermittent fragments of a mellifluous Gaelic conversation will reach your ears long before you have any real certainty as to their tangible existence and their exact whereabouts.

And, having journeyed far out over the cockle-beds, they will appear for all the world like infinitesimal specks upon it—so vast is the Tràigh Mhór when the tide is at the ebb !

A wayfarer may be passing within a few yards of you at Crannag without your being conscious of his passing presence—so soft and dreamy is this place when the tide has gone out toward Eriskay and the Stack Isles, when the sun is high in the blue dome of heaven, and when the lofty cirrus clouds, delicate as tissue-paper, are drifting southward with a slowness scarcely perceptible.

Often will a bumble-bee be winging before you, hurrying one knows not whither, unless it be to the clover-fields of Eoligaray, or to the heathery hills of Eriskay and South Uist. And, maybe, a clan of sea-pyets will speed past you with tremulous call and impetuous flight.

The Magic of Dreamland

And, when the softening dimness of twilight begins to creep over the land, and the faery-haunted isles sprinkled about the Sound of Barra slowly melt away behind the drooping curtains of night, an at-one-ment and a quiescence steal into the soul, filling it with rest and the magic peacefulness of dreamland.

When oppressed and dispirited because of the ever-increasing category of organised immanity that society and Christian civilisation, so-called, are capable of perpetrating

in cold blood—aye, and even with self-approbation and pride and the cognisance of the law—it is to the Great Shore of Barra I would hasten away in quest of communion, of consolation, of beauty undefiled.

There is more poetry in the Tràigh Mhór of Barra than in all the cities that men's hands have builded.

In trekking across the warm, white sands of the Great Shore of Barra in the noon of summer, I am always reminded of one of Byron's Hebrew Melodies which, in breadth and grandeur, are so profoundly suggestive of the Old Testament, of prophetic and patriarchal times :

“ On Jordan's banks the Arabs' camels stray,
On Sion's hill the false one's votaries pray.
The Baal-adorer bows on Sinai's steep,
Yet there, even there, O God, Thy thunders sleep !

There, where Thy finger scorched the tablet stone,
There, where Thy shadow to Thy people shone,
Thy glory shrouded in its garb of fire :
Thyself, none living see and not expire.

Oh ! in the lightning let Thy glance appear ;
Sweep from his shivered hand the oppressor's spear :
How long by tyrants shall Thy land be trod ?
How long Thy temple worshipless, O God ! ”

And then my senses are switched over to the St. Andrew's Halls, where first I heard the Glasgow Orpheus Choir render Max Bruch's arrangement of this Hebraic hymn. Here the genius of three artists—Byron, Bruch, Roberton—coalesces in the creation of an effect that, in my humble judgment, never has been surpassed in choral work. I have derived more inspiration from listening for

five minutes to the Orpheus Choir than I have derived from all the sermons and exegetics I have ever heard. The Orpheus Choir is a credit to Scotland, and one of the few institutions left that make our land worth living in at the present time.

XXI

BLUE BARRA OF THE COCKLES

PERSISTENCE OF AN ANCIENT SUPERSTITION

Now I am eager to tell you something of the wonderful cockle-beds comprising the Tràigh Mhór or Great Shore of Barra. To these cockle-beds I alluded briefly in the preceding chapter. From very early times the Island of Barra has been renowned for its shell-fish, and particularly for its cockles. Scarcely an account of this Hebridean Isle has been written that does not make special mention of its vast cockle-beds.

I have deemed it appropriate to quote several of the better known passages containing references to the cockles of Barra, because I feel that they are so beautiful and quaint. And, besides, they are of such a concise and apt nature that their value would be depreciated and their originality lost, were they paraphrased.

Dean Monro's Credulity

With the exception, perhaps, of Buchanan's testimony (to which we shall be turning in a moment), the earliest historical reference to the cockle-beds which I have been able to find is contained in Dean Monro's *Description of the Western Isles of Scotland called Hybrides*. Dean Monro, you will remember, visited most of the Hebrides in or

about the year 1594, in virtue of his office as High Dean of the Isles. Of the cockles of Barra he writes as follows :

“ In the north of this ile of Barray ther is ane round heigh know, mayne grass and greine round about it to the heid, on the top of quhilk ther is ane spring and fresh water well. This well treuly springs up certaine little round quhyte things, less nor the quantity of ane confeit corne, lykest to the shape and figure of ane litil cokill, as it appearit to me. Out of this well ther runs ane litil strype downwith to the sea, and quhar it enters into the sea ther is ane myle braid of sands, quhilk ebbs ane myle, callit the Trayrmore of Killbaray, that is, the grate sandis of Barray. This sand is all full of grate cokills and alledgit be the ancient countreyemen, that the cokills come down out of the forsaid hill throughe the said strype in the first small forme that we have spoken off, and after ther coming to the sandis growis grate cokills alwayes. Ther is na fairer and more profitable sandis for cokills in all the world. This ile perteins to M'Neill of Barray.”

A Strange “ Item ”

A somewhat similar observation regarding the cockles of Barra is cited in a description of the Western Isles which Skene argues must have been drawn up between the years 1577 and 1595, since it contains a reference to the massacre of the MacDonalds by the MacLeods in the cave at Eigg in 1577, and also bears out that John Stewart of Appin, whose demise occurred in 1599, was living at the time of its compilation.

The actual passage adverting to the cockles of Barra occurs in the form of an “ Item ” appended to the end of

an account of Kisimul Castle and the impregnable position it occupied. It reads thus :

“ Item, in this Ile is ane weill quhairin growis cockles, quhilk is at the fute of ane hill callit the Hill of Barra, twa mile fra the sea.”

Monipennie accepts the Dean's Statement

This theory regarding the origin of the cockles of the Great Shore of Barra is innocently repeated by John Monipennie in his abridged description of the Islands lying in the Deucaledon Sea (1612). Monipennie states that “ out of the sands the people digge out great cockles, which the neighbours about judge either to grow (as it were) of that seed that the springs doe bring from the well, or else (indeed) to grow in that sea.”

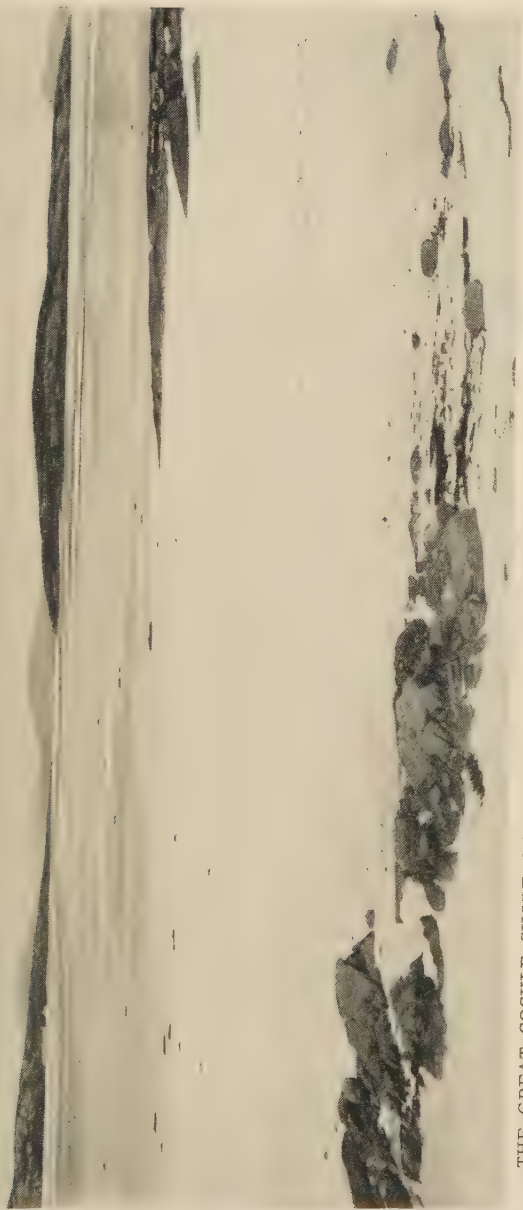
In his momentous *History of the Outer Hebrides* MacKenzie expresses the opinion that neither George Buchanan nor John Monipennie possessed any personal acquaintance with the Western Isles, and that they merely based their accounts on the testimony of Dean Monro, that “ pious and well-informed man.” You will recollect in this connection that Buchanan's observations on the Pigmies' Isle, in the north of Lewis, are very similar to those of the High Dean of the Isles.

“ Certane Litill Cockles Shells ”

The next two references in point of time that I have been able to locate with regard to the origin of the Barra cockles are contained in MacFarlane's *Geographical Collections* relating to Scotland, edited by Sir Arthur Mitchell

from MacFarlane's own typescript in the National Library for Scotland. The former of these is included in "Ane Descriptione of Certaine Pairts of the Highlands of Scotland"—one of a series of discourses giving no clue to the names of the several authors responsible for them. It is suggested in Sibbald's *Repertory* that this undated document was compiled for Sir Robert Gordon—"by a native," says Bishop Nicholson (*Scot. Hist. Lib.*, p. 5). In his preface remarks to the "Descriptione" under review, Mitchell puts the date about 1630. There is every reason to believe that this document was consulted freely by Blaeu. The reference to the Barra cockles is as follows :

"Ther is one litle springand fresh water running out of ane grein hill above the Church, which doeth flow into the sea. And there is springand there certane litill Cockles shells which they alleadge that the samen doth flow into the sea out of the Well and doeth grow in another place next the Church not the tenth part of ane myll from the Church of Barray called Kilbarray. And there is abundance of choice litle cockle shells found. The wholl countrey men and tennants doe convene togidder to this place when the sea doeth ebb and bring with them certaine number of horses and gather in this place abundance of Cockles. The length of this sandie place is ane myll and ane half or therby, and no less broad. Certaine of these Inhabitants will come fyve mylls with ther horses, and bring home asmuch with them as their horses will beare of these cockles. And if ten thousand cold come, they should have als many as there horses were able to carrie everie day gotten and gathered in this place. And it is gotten below the sand. And when you doe come and stand on that sand with your horses you will think the place verie dry,



THE GREAT COCKLE SHORE OF BARRA, SHOWING THE ISLE OF FUDAY IN THE MIDDLE-DISTANCE, AND
THE MOUNTAINS OF ERISKAY AND SOUTH UIST ON THE HORIZON.

but when you doe put zour hands below into the sand you shall see abundance of the saids cockles comeing above the sand, and als much of the sea Water as will wash them from the sand."

" Great and Fair Cokils "

The other reference in MacFarlane's *Geographical Collections* occurs in a document entitled " Noates and Observations of Dyvers parts of the Hielands and Isles of Scotland." In some respects these " Noates " appear to resemble so closely the " Descriptione," from which we have just quoted, as to justify the suspicion that they are merely a synopsis of the latter. They were copied from the Sibbald *Topographical Notices* by MacFarlane's transcriber ; and are said to be in the handwriting of one James Gordon, parson of Rothiemay. However, the bulk of these " Noates " is attributed to Timothy Pont. In fact, it is admitted by James Gordon that many of them are only " drawn furth of Mr. Timothy Pont his papers." For example, in the heading of the " Noates " relating to Badenoch, Gordon declares that " This is wryten out of Mr. Timothies Papers, & in it thur manie things false."

Although the date of these " Noates " is not given, we may surmise that they were prepared about the middle of the seventeenth century. That they did not exist prior to 1644 is definitely admitted by Gordon, when he states that in the summer of that year he was supplied with " noates " by the Laird of Glen Orchy and others.

The passage relating to the cockles of the Great Shore of Barra runs thus :

" There is also a spring of fresche water falling from a green hillok above the Church, falling into the sea hard

by. with this water ar carried down in the sea, innumerable quantities of small cokils so small as they show no more but the rudiment of ther shellfishe and a litle from that, upon the sea sands ar digged up verie great number of great and fair cokils, whereof the people carie away to their use infinit quantities without diminution of the stoar."

A Well prognosticating War

While occupying our attention with the well, from which immature cockles are said to have been borne down to the sea, it may be mentioned that both the "Descriptione" and the "Noates" include an equally credulous statement about another well in the north-east of the Island of Barra. You will observe that the quotation already made from the "Noates" begins with the words, "there is *also* a spring of fresche water," thus presupposing the existence of another well in this locality. The "Descriptione" alludes to the other well in the following terms :

" . . . and in this toun (Kilbar) there is one springand fresh water Well. And the Inhabitants and ancient men and woemen both of men and woemen in this toune and of the Countrie especiallie one ancient man being of fyve or sexscoir zeares old doeth say that when appearance of Warrs wer to be in the Countrey of Barray That certaine drops of blood hath oftymes bein sein in this springand fresh Water Well." The chronicler emphasises the fact that, in addition to the testimony of the older inhabitants, he had this information corroborated by Rory MacNeil, the Chief of Barra at the time. Rory went a step further in alleging that, indicative of the coming of peace, "certaine litle bitts of Peitts wold be sein" in the well. But then

we must take into account that at this time Rory MacNeil was "ane verie ancient man of sexscore yeares old or therby," and that the most insistent informant was "fyve or sexscoir zeares."

On this same well the "Noates" contain the under-noted paragraph :

"Ther is one church in Barra, upon the north or nordeast syd calld Kilbarray. in this toun is a spring of fresche water whilk the inhabitants do believe doth prognosti q warrs. when they ar to be, be drops of blood seen therin."

I have been unable to locate this well with any degree of accuracy. Possibly the well alluded to is that situated at the bend in the road between North Bay and Crannag, and known as *Tobar Ruadh*, Red Well. Yet the foregoing passages would seem to indicate that it lay to the north of the Great Cockle Shore, and within easy distance of the ecclesiastical ruins of Kilbar, at Eoligarry.

"Embryoes of Cockles"

About a hundred years after the visit of Dean Monro to the Hebrides, Martin Martin makes a casual reference to the cockles of Barra in the following passage : "There is another well not far from Tangstill, which the inhabitants say in a fertile year throws up many grains of barley in July and August. And they say that the Well of Kilbar throws up embryoes of cockles, but I could not discern any in the rivulet, the air being at that time foggy."

Doubtless, Dean Monro accepted the authenticity of this fragment of local superstition without even making any personal observation. Martin, on the other hand, was

evidently more sceptical regarding this belief. The probability is that he was familiar with the Dean's account of Barra, and thus felt it incumbent upon him to make special investigations as to the reputed origin of the cockles. At all events it is plain that he did not swallow the pill in entirety, since he did not assert with his predecessor that the cockles were carried down to the Tràigh Mhór in the manner indicated. Personal examination of the rivulet did not reveal that it contained any embryo cockles ; and so Martin contents himself by concluding with the observation that the inhabitants merely *say* the well at Kilbar (Cille-bharra) throws up "embryoes of cockles."

In Times of Scarcity

Two other authoritative references to the great cockle-beds of Barra fall to be noticed here. One occurs in the *Old*, and the other in the *New, Statistical Account*. From the former we learn that several species of shell-fish abound in the sands of Barra ; "but what is singularly beneficial to the inhabitants is the shell-fish called cockle. It is found upon the great sand on the N. end of Barray, in such quantities that in times of great scarcity all the families upon the island (about 200) resort to it for their daily subsistence. It has been computed that the two last summers, which were peculiarly distressing on account of the great scarcity, no less than from 100 to 200 horse-loads of cockles were taken off the sands at low-water every day of the springtides during the months of May, June, July, and August. If the people made use of cockles in plentiful years, they might save as much bread as would prevent a scarcity in the worst of times."



THE TRÀIGH MHÓR OR GREAT COCKLE SHORE OF BARRA AS SEEN FROM CRANNAG, WITH BEN EOLIGARRY
AND THE NARROW ISTHMUS SEPARATING THE GREAT SHORE FROM THE ATLANTIC.

This account was drawn up by the parish minister of Barra in 1794. To it is appended a footnote adverting to the extravagance of Buchanan's assertion that the cockles originated from small animalcula, coming down with the water of a spring situated on the top of a green hill above the sands. The same authority testifies that, at the time of writing, this absurd notion still prevailed among the natives of Barra.

George Buchanan's Assertion

The passage, to which the writer of the *Old Statistical Account* took exception, occurs in the opening chapter of Buchanan's great work intituled *Rerum Scoticarum Historia*. This history of Scotland was compiled in 1582. It is not outwith the bounds of likelihood that, when writing his description of the Western Isles, after having travelled through most of them in 1594, the venerable Dean Monro may have had access to Buchanan's history, and borrowed from it the superstition regarding the cockles of the Great Shore of Barra.

The translation of the relevant passage in Buchanan's *Rerum Scoticarum Historia*, with which we are most familiar, runs as follows :

“ On the north side of Barra riseth a hill full of grass from top to bottom ; and on the summit issueth a spring of fresh water, which flowing down in a rivulet, carries with it into the neighbouring sea some small animals, which are shapeless ; yet, in some sort, though not very plainly, represent those shell-fish we commonly call cockle. This part of the shore, to which the borderers retire, they call the Great Sanda ; because when the sea ebbs, the sand is uncovered for a mile and more. Here they dig up great

shell-fish, which the neighbouring people believe to be bred out of the spawn of those shapeless fish, which the forenamed rill carries down from its fountain; and they are either produced there or at least grow bigger in the sea."

No such statement is contained in the *Travels in the Western Hebrides* (1782-90), written by the Rev. John Lane Buchanan, who was missionary minister to the Isles from the Church of Scotland. From the advertisement prefacing this volume, however, it is obvious that the writer was familiar with the descriptions of the Western Isles ascribed to Dean Monro and to George Buchanan. The book just alluded to was published in 1793—the year prior to the appearance of the *Old Statistical Account*, wherein occurs the foregoing footnote challenging the accuracy of Buchanan's version of the origin of the cockles.

A Limitless Supply of Shell-fish

In the *New Statistical Account* we are informed that, with regard to shell-fish, no place on the western coast of Scotland abounds more in this article of diet than Barra. Of cockles we read that they are gathered from the sands of the Great Shore of Barra in such immense quantities that scores of horse-loads may be taken up during a single tide, without any apparent diminution in the supply.

Frequently in times of hardship and distress have the cockle-beds of the Tràigh Mhór been the means of providing the poorer people of Barra with an almost limitless supply of nutritious food. In lean seasons the Islanders usually commence to use the cockles in March or April. During the scarce years of 1836 and 1837 the inhabitants

of Barra and of the adjacent islands practically subsisted on the cockles dug up from the Great Shore. About the 'eighties of last century the cockle-beds of Barra proved so productive that an average of a hundred horse-loads were collected daily and dispatched in bags to the London market along with quantities of periwinkles and other bivalve shell-fish.

And as recently as May of this year (1928) a special consignment of cockles was shipped from the Tràigh Mhór of Barra, with the object of being planted in specially prepared beds at Pilling Sands, near Fleetwood. Apparently cockles once formed a valuable article of diet among the people of Lancashire; but the cockle-beds on that coast have been exhausted for a number of years. The official of the Lancashire Fisheries, who is in charge of the experiment, is of opinion that the Barra cockles are the finest in the British Isles. Fancy the food supply of a great English industrial centre being replenished from a remote Hebridean island like Barra!

For long enough the beliefs have been current in Barra that, as though Providence had so ordained it, the cockles of the Tràigh Mhór are always most plentiful in scarce years, and that, whereas cockles and spout-fish are to be found deeper in the sands with north winds, they are more readily procurable when the wind is from the south.

Dean Monro refuted

It will be noticed that, of the nine authorities quoted, no fewer than seven (George Buchanan, Dean Monro, the unknown author of the description of the Western Isles written between 1577 and 1595, John Monipennie, the

“Descriptione” of 1630, James Gordon’s “Noates,” and Martin) recite a credulous piece of traditional hearsay, which would seem to have originated during the latter half of the sixteenth century.

A footnote in the *Old Statistical Account* questions the accuracy of George Buchanan’s statement. Commenting upon the absurdity of this statement, so far as Dean Monro may have been responsible for its origin and currency, the *New Statistical Account* expresses itself thus :

“Nothing can show the credulity of the Dean more than this account of the cockles being formed in embryo on the top of a hill, in a fresh-water spring, and thereafter carried down to the sea where they grow large. There certainly is such a spring yet to be seen, but no visible appearance of anything like cockles forming there.”

Perhaps it ought to be mentioned in conclusion that the spring, which is identified locally as being the one that threw up “embryoes of cockles,” is situate within three or four yards of the summit of Ben Eoligarry, only a few minutes’ climb from old Eoligarry House. The spring is surrounded on three sides by a patch of quagmire ground, perforated by the hoof-marks of the horses and cattle grazing on Ben Eoligarry. The water of it is charged with calcium carbonate, which is deposited on sand grains and similar objects, thus giving rise to the superstition that the water contained minute cockles.



LOOKING ACROSS THE WHITE SANDS OF UIG BAY, IN THE DIRECTION OF ARDROIL.

XXII

ISLAND ROADS

THEIR VARIETY AND CHARM

So numerous and varied are the roads in the Isles, which like to be traversed as often as the wayfarer has the mind to traverse them, that the affections of the lover of wild, open places are strangely divided between them. Along several Hebridean roads does the writer travel in his fancy ; and each journey upon them would seem to disclose so many fresh beauties and interests and unexpected lovelinesses that he is bewildered when making an attempt to choose the road that puts the strongest spell of love on him.

In the Isle of Lewis

I know every inch of an old drove-road through a brackened glen and leading down to the sea, and a cart-track winding round the stony shore to a peat-reeked croft in the Isle of Lewis ; and oft-times have I traced out the tunnelled spoor of the “ little life of the grass ”—the lesser shrew (*beothachan feoir*)—when wandering along this old drove-road. And on the typical island road skirting Little Loch Roag, and threading by Miavaig toward the white sands of Uig Bay, may be felt something of that insoluble

mystery pervading the remotest parts of Lewis, when there falls a twilit purple upon it.

And the long, long road to Carloway and the equally lonely road to Barvas and Ness bear one across the loveliest moors in all the world. Och, och! there's a lot to be loving in old Lewis for those who have the hunger for love on them.

Frequently, too, are my thoughts attracted along the road to Dalmore, where the sun, with the Byzantine goldness of his downgoing, illumines with oes the leagueless fairway to *Tìr nan Òg* and Immortality. And it's between Dalmore and the lengthless labyrinths of Eternity to the westward of it that—

“ Soon as the evening shades prevail,
The moon takes up the wondrous tale.”

Here, also, in the stilly darkness, a myriad stars lie at anchor in the great Atlantean vastnesses, whispering the golden legends of a benighted firmament.

Toward the Isle of “ Mary Rose ”

And in one's musings one sometimes is transported along the road that winds among the dusky mountains of Harris, where the winters often are so inclement that the shy deer are forced to forsake their semoted hiding-places to seek sustenance among the sodden “ lazy-beds ” with the crofters' sheep.

The road bearing southward and then westward from Ath-Linne (Aline), scaling the treacherous Clisham, will lead you into the domains of dizziness and bewilderment ere it delivers you in a tolerably rational condition at

Ardhasig. This, indeed, is a route that would test the heart and courage of a giant. And, doubtless, the Fingalians trod it once! Goliaths have perished by the wayside in circumstances less strenuous than are experienced by those who tramp between Lewis and Harris! But see Loch Seaforth on a summer morning from the steep declivities of this road, shadowy and moveless at the turn of the tide, and you will ask yourself why you ever submit to spending an hour in the drab, monotonous streets of civilisation.

And then the road leading to Amhuinnsuidhe and toward the enchanted Isle of "Mary Rose" has a charm quite of its own. The end of it, I think, is about the nearest to which the spirit incarnate can get to Flath-Innis, the mystery Isle of Heroes, whither Cairbre, the mythological champion of Gaeldom, bears the souls of the slain in battle. Flath-Innis is the Celtic Valhalla. It is to be sought in *Tír fo Thuinn*, Land-under-Waves, and far, far beneath the sun that sets.

The Roads of Harris

No less bewitching is the road twisting tortuously amid the wild and storm-scarred mountains of South Harris by Borge and Scarastavore and Obbe to St. Clement's Church at Rodil, where moulders the dust of the Siol Tormoid Chieftains, and of Mary of the Songs who crooned faery lullabies to the baby heirs in Dunvegan Castle. The sea-scapes on the west of South Harris are too wonderful and inspiring to admit of description—white sands, green and blue and heliotrope waters, clouds delicate as tissue-paper, sea-music, clans of downy bipeds whose "home is the angry wave," elusive mountains somewhere behind a faery

fabric of purple and gold, and the permanent mystery of forever-ness brooding over all. O God! for a breath of the Atlantean surge, and a glimpse of a Harris seascape!

How emphasised is the inadequacy of mere words as a vehicle of expression when one endeavours to put them on a scene in South Harris; but, if you take the rough road that meanders westward toward the Sound of Taransay between the Luskentyre Hills and the Tràigh Luskentyre, you will learn that speechlessness and inexpressibility are the keynotes of Hebridean poetry. And well do I recollect an autumn noontide dreamed away at Luskentyre with my dear, Gaelic friend, Iain MacGhille Mhuire, who swam through the waves of weeds and nettles of the old burial-place down by the sea in quest of the tomb of the Campbells of Ensay, and left me to linger contentedly along the white, white shore, watching the whiter airships sailing noiselessly across the blue that canopied the Isles of Soay and Taransay and the magic west. How acutely I feel my limitations when I visualise the sands and the sea, and the machar and the bees and the wild flowers, and the sea-birds and the clouds, at Luskentyre, in the Harris!

An Unhappy Experiment

Not lacking its note of sadness—nay, of tragedy—is the picturesque road to Harris. When you come to the isthmus at Tarbert, across which the Viking rievvers are accredited with having dragged their galleys of war, as at every other Tarbert in Scotland—when you come to the isthmus at Tarbert, you are reminded of an unhappy West Sea Bubble that burst in our own time; and, after travelling miles and miles along the road meandering among the intricate

mountains of South Harris, where great herds of deer trail across your track with an air of aloofness and disdain toward any one who would presume to trespass upon their fastnesses, you arrive at a forlorn and forsaken place. And that place once went by the name of Obbe. Now, as if by way of perpetuating the memory of a social and economic fiasco, the old and poetic name of Obbe has been displaced by the name, Leverburgh—a name that in meaning and sound is as alien to the Western Isles as any name could be.

Leverburgh cuts a sorry figure these days. All the prodigious schemes inaugurated there by the late Viscount Leverhulme went agley, as so often do “the best-laid schemes o’ mice and men.” Obbe shared in the calamity that a somewhat similar change in policy had brought to Stornoway not very long before. Consequent upon the demise of the late proprietor, who had sunk untold wealth among the rocks of South Harris, there set in a woeful period of dissolution and removal. No less far-reaching in its effects was this phase of *de*-struction than had been the unprecedented mania for *con*-struction in the very same place a year or two previously. In a night, literally, a wave of prosperity recoiled as a wave of adversity.

And thus it is that the road twisting through South Harris to Rodil is reminiscent of many unpleasant recollections, and scarred with not a few eyesores. To-day, the most conspicuous characteristics of Obbe are deserted quays and breakwaters, untenanted sheds and bothies, the sites of dismantled factories, the unsleepered tracks of light railways, and odd girders and similar products of the foundry awaiting transhipment by sundry purchasers.

A sad story, indeed! And, in striving to forget it, let

us remember with felicity that, betwixt the western sea and the elf-haunted hills of Harris, there lies a tiny village known not as Leverburgh, but by the beautiful name of Obbe.

The Roads of Skye

Enchanted are the roads in the Isle of the Mist ; and I am thinking that the sweetest road in all Skye is the road zigzagging from Dunvegan to Suardal and the farm at Claigean. Overgrown is this road with grass, shaggy heather, and bracken, fragrant in summer with bog-myrtle, and silent in winter but for the bleating of sheep and the cluck of startled grouse.

And the storm-swept road to Trumpan, in Vaternish, will urge you to tramp to where, on a day of days, the Battle of the Spoiling of the Dyke was fought—men there were that day in sad, sad plight, their heads downward and the soles of their feet uppermost !

And it's the road through Glen Bretil that, even when the wildest storm is crashing among the Cuchullins, will thrill the traveller to the marrow, and lure him on to the ruined fort at Rudh' an Dunain, where in times gone by MacLeod of MacLeod was constrained to station a Lieutenant of the Coast to protect his territories against the raids of the sea-riever from Lochlann and the predatory expeditions of Clan Ranald's birlinns.

The shore road by Ardvasar and Isle Oronsay will be putting a spell on the wanderer who takes it when the snow-capped hills of Knoydart and Morar are mirrored in the shadowy Sound of Sleat.

The Roads of the Uists

Of the roads in the Uists we need not say much. Take the one west-going from Loch Maddy across North Uist, if you be anxious to traverse a land that is all lochs and ponds. Endless would seem the long road stretching the entire length of South Uist from Pollachar to Carnan Inn and, beyond the South Ford, continuing across the Island of Benbecula to the North Ford, by which Benbecula is separated from North Uist. Dreamy is this island road in midsummer when its fringes are bedecked with wild flowers of every conceivable hue : dreich is it in midwinter when sheets of livid rain are falling upon it, and when it is being swept by the winds that comb the long, wet, withered tresses of the machar in *Tìr a' Mhurain*, Land of the Machar-grass.

In the Isle of Barra

And now to the Isle of Barra, where there is a road possessing all the beauty and charm of the foregoing island roads, and wanting in none of their interests. And that road is the road from the clachan of Castlebay to the old farm of Eoligarra. In your journeying thither, your eyes will light upon the ruins of a strange, little, island castle that, down the centuries, has succeeded pretty well in concealing its story from the knowledge of men—"a litle toure of stone and lyme builded in ane litle Illand," situated in a picturesque loch. Farther on, you will pass close by caverns wherein the Atlantic makes sea-music that is soothing to the spirit. And you will come to a spot where much of the white sands of adjacent sand-dunes has drifted before the winds of time athwart the road,

making the traveller imagine on a hot, summer day that he is on the edge of a great desert, dazzling in the sun, sweltering, monotonous, lifeless, soundless.

One might describe this spot as a wee desert. Were the turban of a Bedouin, mounted on a camel, suddenly to be descried moving along the sand-dunes, the setting would be complete from the viewpoint of a person lying pensively in one of the undulating folds of sand. Long is the machar-grass in places ; and to bask awhile in one of the sand-pits hereabouts, listening to the music of the sea, is a temptation yielded to by every one wandering leisurely toward Eoligarry.

In due time the wayfarer comes to the Tràigh Mhór or Great Shore of Barra ; and the road to Eoligarry disappears into the soft, knee-deep sand that, in a great semicircle above mean tide-mark, borders the vast cockle-beds of Barra. Beyond this scene of tense beauty starts the last lap of the road to Eoligarry. It is a cart-track, and consists of three lines of white, hardened sand, threading their way, side by side, through the rolling folds concealing the old Highland farm of Eoligarry from the eyes of men approaching from the south or west.

At the farm of Eoligarry you will receive hospitality in Highland style at the hands of a host of more than three score years and ten. And he it is who, at your departure, will send you forth with a benediction, and an assurance that you are welcome to return to Eoligarry whenever time and opportunity be favourable.

The road to Eoligarry binds the wayfarer with a spell, whether it be trodden in the lulling peacefulness of the dusky wind of twilight, or to the melodic symphony of the sea and the song of the singing rain.



THE WHITE, NOISELESS AIRSHIPS AT LUSKENTYRE.

XXIII

THE ROAD TO EOLIGARRY—AND BACK

A TRAMP ROUND THE ISLE OF BARRA

So much is there on the road to Eoligarry to engage the pedestrian's attention that an early start from Castlebay is advisable if hurrying is to be avoided at the latter end of the day. For a visit to Eoligarry, a bright sun and the whole day at one's disposal are the prime requisites. You cannot reap much benefit from an excursion of this nature if you be looking at your watch repeatedly, and pondering whether you will be back at your hotel in time to dress for dinner, or to comply with some equally unnecessary formality. The lure of the dinner-jacket and the manicure set has robbed many a summer day of its pleasure. "Boiled shirts" and appurtenant trappings should be dispensed with while in the Hebrides. It seems to me that the whole *raison d'être* of going to an island like Barra or Skye should be to escape for a time from the irritating conventionalities that man, "the social being," makes a pretence at being unable to exist without.

St. Clair's Castle

You will not have travelled far on the west-going road to Eoligarry before you find yourself passing through the township of Kentangval, whose quaint, thatched houses

are clustered around the head of the Loch of the same name. Beyond Kentangval, on the other side of the steep brae known as *Bealach a' Chnuic Fhraoich*, the Pass of the Heathery Hill, is the sheet of fresh water known as Loch St. Clair. This Loch, lying in a hollow and overshadowed by Ben Tangval, is passed on the left of the road, and some little distance below and from it.

Standing on a tiny islet near the eastern end of Loch St. Clair are what some maps describe as the ruins of Dùn MhicLeoid. Tradition in Kentangval has it that this ruined *dùn*, or keep, received its name from the MacLeods who (says the tradition) were overlords of Barra prior to the advent of the MacNeils. At the moment we need not concern ourselves with the accuracy of this tradition. The picturesque and interesting ruins of this square keep are better known at the present day as St. Clair's Castle—though the older inhabitants of Barra still allude to “*Tùr Leoid*,” Leod's Tower.

St. Clair's Castle is introduced several times—and skilfully too—by Elizabeth Helme into her novel entitled *St. Clair of the Isles* or *The Outlaws of Barra*. Indeed, the first chapter of this book opens with the following prophetic utterance by the seer of Roskelyn Glen :

“Break, ye rude waves of the Northern Sea ! Break on the tower of M'Leod. Like the rock on which it is founded, it mocks your efforts. Lonely and forsaken, its halls are desolate, and its chambers the retreat of birds who mistake its galleries for the recesses of the mountains. Soon, soon shall they afford refuge to the eagle, who under his wing shall rear the bloody arm on which shall hang the future fate of Scotland.”

Doubtless, St. Clair's Castle is of considerable antiquity.

Though at the present time its ruins do not exceed fifteen feet in altitude, it is thought that originally it was a three-storied keep, having floors of wood, but possessing neither stairs nor fireplaces. The entrance, which faces north, was on the first floor. An early seventeenth-century document included in MacFarlane's *Geographical Collections* (Vol. ii.) contains the undernoted reference to it :

“And ther is ane fresh water Logh betwixt Kilbarr and this castle of Kilsimull. And ther is a litle toure of stone and lyme builded in ane litle Illand in the midst of this Logh, and the toune wherein this litle toure is builded is called Arnistill.”

St. Columba's Well

Near Loch St. Clair is a well which the natives of Barra call Tobar Chaluim Chille, believing it to be the spring frequented by St. Columba. “And they were saying that St. Columba left a kind of a spell on that well,” James MacKinnon, my informant at Kentangval, told me. However, generations of East Coast fishermen have been in the habit of calling it St. Clair's Well. In olden times the fishermen of Barra used to drink of the water of this well on Sundays in the hope of getting heavy shots of herring during the week ; and in pre-Reformation days, when the Church of St. Barr, at Eoligarry, was the only place of public worship in the Isle of Barra, the Islesfolk sailing over from Vatersay and the more distant of the Barra Isles used to slake their thirst at this well on the way to divine service.

And some there are who say that, before proceeding to church, the womenfolk of these Islands were accustomed to tidy their hair when gazing at their reflections in the clear

water of St. Clair's Well. We may take it that at this time mirrors were not included among the domestic utensils in vogue throughout the Barra Isles.

A Modern Golgotha

Jutting out into Loch St. Clair in the direction of MacLeod's Castle is a sandy, reed-fringed peninsula, known in Gaelic as "*Na Mairbh*," meaning "The Slain." The ancient supposition that this low, flat promontory was the site of a fierce conflict between the inhabitants of Barra and the occupants of the Castle has been strengthened by the discovery in this locality from time to time of complete skeletons, human bones, fragments of swords and dirks, and brooches of bronze and brass. This supposition is made use of in *St. Clair of the Isles*.

Hebridean Sea-music

Continuing beyond Loch St. Clair and toward Eoligarry, one passes through, or close to, the clachans of Tanguisdaile, Culnamuck, and Bachd. Near the last-mentioned place the road runs hard by the western sea ; and here it is that the wayfarer with ample time at his disposal may listen to the richest strains of *ceol-mara*, or sea-music. No one with a musical ear and an atom of poetry in his spiritual make-up would be loth to linger here, either in winter or in summer, when the western tide is pouring in through the creeks and caverns and among the fallen rocks of Halaman Bay and of the chersonese at Borge, and echoing against the cliffs and boulders characterising the iron-bound coast-line between Ard Allasdale and Ard Greian !



SEA MUSIC—AT TANGUSDALE, ON THE ROAD TO EOLIGARRY.



"'MONG THE DOWN OF THE THISTLE DUNES"—SAND-DUNES ON THE ROAD
TO EOLIGARRY.

“ Bait-pits ” among the Rocks

Though not by any means so conspicuous as they are among the rocks of Uist, countless are the hollows artificially scooped out of the sea-rocks hereabouts. You may recollect that Amy, wife of John, Lord of the Isles, encouraged the islanders of Uist to chisel out, in the rocks down by the sea, “ bait-pits ” in which shell-fish, such as limpets, cockles, and whelks, might be crushed, in order to attract fish, either when cast into the sea or when attached as bait to the *dorgh*, or hand-line.

The Site of St. Brendan's Shrine

Beyond Bachd lie Borge and Balnacraig (Craigston), to each of which townships a very secondary track veers landward from the road leading on to Cuier, North Bay, and Eoligarry. Near Borge Point are the ruins of St. Brendan's Chapel, and an old burying-ground still resorted to as a place of interment. Of the former, only a small portion of a gable remains. The religious sanctity of this neighbourhood appears to have been recognised at a very early date. Excepting the ruins of Kilbar, near Eoligarry House, to my knowledge this Chapel is the only other ecclesiastical building on the mainland of Barra. Close to the road to Eoligarry, and just where there branches off across the machar a sandy track to the ruins of St. Brendan's Chapel and the burying-ground aforesaid, are two Druid stones of no great dimensions above ground. How far these stones may have sunk into the sandy soil in which they stand, or to what extent the level of the sand may

have risen since they were erected, are matters for conjecture.

The western sea rolls in on both sides of St. Brendan's Chapel ; and not a few velvety seals have I watched from the rocks in this vicinity. One day, while pottering about with a camera at Borge Point, I descried a couple of seals manœuvring quite unconcernedly within a yard or two of some boys, who were fishing with rods among the fissured rocks. It's the worshippers at St. Brendan's shrine that used to be within hearing of the eternal song of the western sea, for, even on a comparatively calm day, the surge breaks with a rapturous melody on the ageless asperities of Borge Point, and wails long and loudly in the great bight sweeping northward in two semicircles to Ard Greian. And no lover of sea-music should fail to hearken to the foaming breakers that, driven before a south-westerly wind, come racing in upon the sands of Halaman Bay, and oft-times crash unwarily on the submerged reefs to the windward of Ceann nan Leac.

One of the most picturesque scenes in the Western Isles may be seen in Barra when at nightfall in summer the womenfolk from the neighbouring crofts go down to the machar at Borge Point, each of them carrying a milking-pail. In the dusk they sometimes appear like intangible figures flitting to and fro upon the close-cropped grass, silhouetted with their kine against the Atlantic and a pale, indistinct horizon, and moving, as it were, like noiseless spirits on the edge of a hemisphere. But for the spasmodic tinkling of a handle on the side of a metal milking-pail, one might take them to be mere creatures of illusion.

Dun of the Mountain

Within a hundred yards of the road to Eoligarry is the site of the ancient *dùn* or fort known as Dùn Borge. To-day nothing remains to mark the spot but a symmetrical grassy knowe on which an odd stone is visible here and there. Not far from Dùn Borge, and situated on the south side of the stream demarcating Borge and Craigston, is Dùn an t-Sleibhe, the Dun of the Mountain. This broch gives one a better idea of its original nature and extent, though it, too, is sorely dilapidated and overgrown with turf. The site of Dùn an t-Sleibhe commands a fine prospect on all sides, and on the west a wide stretch of the Atlantic.

Time was when the MacNeils lived in the locality of Dùn an t-Sleibhe ; and the story is recited in Barra of how a certain fiddler chief rebuked a messenger who interrupted his fiddle-playing at the Dun of the Mountain with the unimportant news that his son and heir had been killed in the American Wars. This chief, it is said, had disowned his son because of his having forsaken the tenets of the Roman Church and embraced Protestantism.

While writing of the duns of Barra, it may be mentioned here that over a mile inland from Balnacraig, and perched on the saddle between Beinn Mhartuin and Grianan, is Dùn Bharpa, a chambered cairn that to-day is represented by little more than a confused heap of stones of every shape and size. Great masses of these stones, however, are still in a circular position, having been circumposed at intermittent intervals with what appear to have been intended to serve as retaining boulders. Dùn Bharpa must have been a fort of tremendous dimen-

sions, for its mere ruins measure roughly eighteen yards in diameter.

From the eyes of the sentinel in Dùn Bharpa the sea was obscured to the south-west by the sloping shoulders of Ben Tangval. To the north of it the cotton-grassed slopes of An Criathrach (the name applied to this locality) decline toward the townships of Cuier, Greian, and Cliat, and the hills known as Ben Cliat (680 feet) and Erival (654 feet). Beyond lie the Sound of Barra and the mountains of South Uist.

The *Old Statistical Account* enumerates no fewer than eleven duns in the Parish of Barra, five of which are located on the Isle of Barra itself, two on Vatersay, and one on each of the Islands of Sandray, Pabbay, Mingulay, and Berneray. These forts some ascribed to the Danes, who are supposed to have built them in sight of one another so that, in the event of invasion by a foe, the alarm might be signalled from district to district with due rapidity.

Hollow of the Coracle

After Craigston, the road to Eoligarry bears in the air of Allasdale. At a spot between these two places it is carried across a cavern, into which the tide once swept. The steep, precipitous chasm to the landward side of the road, now entirely separated from the sea, is called Sloc a' Churaich, the Hollow or Pit of the Coracle. The oldest inhabitants of Barra say that long, long ago boats were drawn up and beached on the pebbly floor of Sloc a' Churaich; and there once dwelt in this neighbourhood a man named Alasdair a' Churaich, whose descendants, I am told, still reside quite near.



THE TOWNSHIPS OF BORVE AND BALNACRAIG (CRAIGSTON).



HALAMAN BAY AND BORVE POINT AT NIGHTFALL.
(Note the site of St. Brendan's Chapel.)

The Parish Church of Barra

A little beyond Allasdale the road to Eoligarry curves inland and eastwards through ninety degrees to Cuier, where are the manse and the original Parish Church of Barra. The Church was erected early last century (in 1816, according to the *New Statistical Account*), the site chosen being as near the centre of the parish as was practicable. To the Church was attached a grass glebe calculated at the time to be sufficient for the grazing of sixteen soums of cattle. About 1840 the incumbent converted much of the glebe into excellent arable land.

The Church itself stands approximately midway between Castlebay and Eoligarry. Seldom is it that the key is not in the door of it; and, consequently, the passer-by, who wishes to enter the Church, has little to do by way of gaining ingress. However, the vast majority of the natives of Barra being Roman Catholics, few there are who take the trouble these days to inspect the interior of the Parish Church. The internal arrangements of this edifice are typical of the average Protestant church in the Highlands—bare, stern, drafty, uncomfortable, and totally devoid of any suggestion of art and beauty. Situated below the pulpit is the precentor's seat. The pews are of crimson colour; and I cannot recall whether the minister's pew even had a cushion. The walls are distempered pink; and here and there the consequences of leaking roof or window are to be seen. When casually inspecting this Church some months ago, in the hope either of discovering some relic or of disturbing the proverbial church rat, on a dusty shelf immediately under the pulpit lectern I found a

piece of paper on which was written a request which, translated from the Gaelic, ran as follows : " Mind, now, don't keep us later than a quarter to one ! "

The Church is surrounded by a graveyard that in June and July is stifled with weeds and grasses and wild flowers of every variety ; and in a hollow nearby is the old, lichened manse of Cuier.

Minister and Chief at Variance

All the windows admitting light to the Parish Church of Barra are on one side of the edifice ; and local legend tells that this circumstance originated in the following manner. Upon a time the minister at Cuier and MacNeil of Barra were at variance as to where the glebe ought to be granted. The minister insisted on having the glebe as near as possible to the manse at Cuier, where it now is ; but the Chief, feeling that Cuier was rather close to his own private sanctuary of Eoligarry, offered to grant the glebe at Borge or Balnacraig. Owing to the fact that the alternative site suggested by the Chief was frequently inundated in times of heavy rain by the overflow of the burn that traverses this locality, the minister flatly declined to accept the offer. Eventually MacNeil realised that the only solution of the difficulty was to submit to the minister's demand for the glebe at Cuier. Now, in respect of the relative shallowness of the soil at Cuier and similar agrestic disadvantages, the minister thought himself entitled to a more extensive glebe than would have been his due, had he elected to accept it in the vicinity of Borge.

Angry, indeed, was MacNeil of Barra on realising that, even on the question of extent, the minister had outwitted

him; and so in his capacity as laird he determined to exercise his prerogative in affairs appertaining to the building of the proposed Parish Church of Barra. Wherefore he ordered that all the windows be on the north-east side of the Church, lest the sun should shine on the minister while he occupied the pulpit at midday service, and lest he should be able to cast an occasional glance in the direction of his manse when conducting divine worship. And to this day all the windows in the Parish Church of Barra occur in the wall farthest removed from the sun.

A Dispute over Seaware

Succeeding years did little to remove the animosity that existed between MacNeil of Barra and the parish minister, ensuing from the dispute about the glebe. And, when granting freeholds at Greian some years later, MacNeil authorised certain cottars to lead as much seaware as they cared from the foreshore below the glebe. This unrestricted liberty soon brought the minister's successor into conflict with the chief. More than once were the cottars of Greian interrupted by the minister when they were in the act of gathering seaware on the shore below the glebe. In course of time they felt obliged to dispatch a messenger with a written grievance to MacNeil, who in the meanwhile was residing at Eoligarry—whither we are on our way at the moment. Desirous at all costs of avoiding any personal difference with the minister at Cuier, the Chief of Barra prevailed upon his brother, Hugh MacNeil by name, to return with the messenger to Greian, and to conduct himself there as he thought the occasion required.

Swift, to be sure, was Hugh to execute his mandate.

In virtue of it, he ordered all the cottars to prepare their ponies and creels, and to proceed forthwith to the shore below the glebe-house. On arrival there, Hugh seized a graip and, by way of making a beginning, filled several creels with ware. Soon afterwards the minister summoned the chief for the summary conduct of this brother ; but the court found that neither peat nor seaweed was attached to the glebe at Cuier. And for his trouble the minister thereafter had to convey his fuel all the way from South Uist.

Some years later MacNeil's wife fell ill ; and in recognition of the minister's having called to ask for her, despite the serious differences that originally had emanated from the granting of the glebe, MacNeil of Barra bestowed on him the right of turbary in the Dark Glen, and the privilege of cutting seaware on the shore below the glebe.

What proportion of truth the above story may contain I cannot say ; but I have recited it to you as I collected it quite recently at Kinloch, in Barra.

A Lake Dwelling

Well, we are still on our way to Eoligarry, though the several digressions we have been making *en route* might justify your wondering whether we really have an objective at all !

Cuier is approximately half-way between Castlebay and Eoligarry ; and by far the more enchanting half of the journey has yet to be covered. A little over a mile beyond the Church is an old market stance, in the vicinity of which there breaks off a cart-track leading to the great peat-mosses of the Dark Glen, and curving round until it

merges imperceptibly into the very heart of Barra. In the angle formed with the road to Eoligarry by this cart-track is Loch an Dùin. This is the largest fresh-water loch in Barra, its area being slightly greater than that of Loch St. Clair, which we have left some five miles behind us. Loch an Dùin undoubtedly took its name from the now ruined *dùn* standing on an artificial islet in the Loch itself, and reached by a curved causeway of stones. As the result of heavy rain, the level of Loch an Dùin frequently is raised sufficiently to submerge the entire causeway, thus completely insulating the crannog on which the *dùn* was built.

“ A Little Mill ”

To-day this crannog is dilapidated in every sense of the term ; and so covered are its fallen walls with bramble bushes that at certain seasons of the year they barely are noticeable. There are brambles galore here in autumn ; and on more than one occasion have they helped to fill the corners of a toom stomach, when the mellowness of the day has tempted the writer to linger too long on his way to Eoligarry.

Since Barra can boast no rivers, but only a few insignificant streams, we may assume that querns were used here long after legislative authority had compelled tacksman and tenant in less remote parts of Scotland to abandon quern-grinding in favour of water-driven mills. During the reign of Alexander III. it was a penal offence to grind grain with “ hand myles,” except in cases where a storm prevented the quern-grinder from conveying his grain to a mill, or where the nearest mill was sufficiently removed from him to justify his resorting to the quern.

The mill driven by the overflow of Loch an Dùin was the only water-mill in the Isle of Barra. The document included in MacFarlane's *Geographical Collections*, and already quoted from, refers to "one litle Water in a toun called Quir (Cuier), and ther is a litle mill in that water and no more mills in all the Illand." I am of opinion that the mill alluded to is none other than the mill that used to be turned by the overflow of Loch an Dùin.

The same authority makes the following quaint reference to the use of the quern in Barra : " Bot everie husbandman in the countrey hes ane Instrument in their houses called one Kewrne and the two stones doth lye on the house floore, and that place is made cleane."

Cart-track to the Tràigh Mhór

Beyond Loch an Dùin and the ruined mill the road begins to descend fairly rapidly and, passing through a small plantation of stunted, brambled, honeysuckled, wind-seared spruces and fir-trees that grow on both sides of a stream-filled valley, brings one down to the sea at North Bay, where an indifferent cart-track strikes northward to the Great Cockle Shore of Barra, and to Eoligarry beyond. To my way of thinking, the most fascinating part of the journey to Eoligarry commences at North Bay, whence half an hour's tramp at a comfortable pace deposits you at Crannag, on the edge of the Tràigh Mhór or Great Shore. No wayfarer with any sense of adventure would turn at Crannag, if the state of the tide permitted him to trek across the great ford to *terra firma* at Eoligarry.

Tangled Creeks and Shadowy Fiords

In order to return from Eoligarry to Castlebay, our original starting-point, it is not necessary to retrace our steps by way of Cuier and Borge, since the road, which we have followed as far as North Bay, is continued along the east side of Barra, bringing us back to Castlebay by Bruernish, Ersary, Skallary, and Breivig. The topographical features of the east coast are widely different from those of the west. The sandy bays and sand-dunes and machar of the west give way on the east to tangled creeks and shadowy fiords in miniature. And I am thinking that the most beautiful corner touched by the road travelling along the east side of Barra is the inmost creek of Loch Obe. See it on a still evening at high tide, when the shadow of Ben Obe is reflected in it and a small, masted boat floats motionlessly off a rocky jetty, purposely designed by nature, as it were.

The Road to Castlebay

Much of this road is declivitous, since it rises to a fair altitude above sea-level in a comparatively short distance. Speaking generally, its surface is inferior to that of the road which led us from Castlebay to North Bay. Two fairly trying braes (the one stretching up from North Bay, and the other leading down into Castlebay) add to it the characteristics of a typical mountain road. Their existence, together with the general state of their surface, obliges most wheeled traffic to adopt the west-going road to Eoligarry, which, though longer, has fewer gradients and a much

better surface on the whole. Nevertheless, the enjoyable stretch beginning at Bruernish and continuing round Loch Obe and through Balnabodach, the Township of the Old Men, to Lochan nam Faoileann, the Little Loch of the Sea-mews, repays one for the roughness of the remainder of the road to Castlebay.

On one of the several islets in Loch nic Ruaidhe (a small sheet of water situated about half a mile from Balnabodach, and at an elevation of roughly 200 feet above the level of the sea) is a ruin similar in structure to the Loch an Dùin crannog, to which allusion has just been made. Evidences of its having been reached by a causeway are not wanting.

A Welter of Islands and Skerries

From a hill above North Bay may be descried the intricate channel-ways separating the innumerable islands, skerries, and submerged rocks, between which the local fishermen pass to and from the Oitir Mhór and the open sea. A glance at a map showing the welter of islands bounding the Oitir Mhór on the south and east will assist the imagination in reviewing the dangers that bestrew the course of the navigator on dark, stormy nights. At low water the number of obstacles visible between Hirivagh or Bruernish and the Sound of Barra seems doubled. Though to some extent the larger Islands of Fuiary, Flodday, Hellisay, and Gighay break the running of heavy seas in bad weather, by no means without currents and kindred perils are the channels dividing them; and to see a small boat, threading her way under sail through these sounds to Ard Mhór or to North Bay on a gusty day, is an object-



ST. CLAIR'S CASTLE, OR CASTLE MACLEOD (DÙN MHICLEOID), IN LOCH
ST. CLAIR.



LOCH AN DÙIN AND THE ROAD TO NORTH BAY.
(Note the Crannog in the Loch, and the Causeway leading to it.)

lesson in navigation and manœuvre. The beautiful rock-studded patch of shallow water between Hellisay and Gighay is much frequented by seals. This locality is also a favourite haunt of herons which nest—well, perhaps it would be wise to reserve this piece of information !

At the End of the Road

One of the great joys of the road to Eoligarry is that he who takes it may be pretty certain of having the better part of it to himself. He may be utterly selfish in his desire ; but there *are* times when a meditative person wants to see as little as possible of the human species. In summer, he who tramps to Eoligarry may meet a cart or two conveying boxes of live lobsters to the pier at Castlebay in time for transhipment to the mainland by the *Cygnets*. If the weather be hot, he will observe that these boxes are covered over with wet, fresh dulse, so as to protect the lobsters from the scorching rays of the sun. He may encounter a few peat-creelers too, and perhaps an unbridled pony half-hidden in a load of hay or grass. And then he may notice a decrepit creature stooping on the foreshore, searching diligently for fragments of wood among the rejectamenta of the sea.

Much of the charm of a road depends on what awaits one at its end. The road from Castlebay to Eoligarry terminates at Eoligarry House—an old-world place where, in welcoming every stranger among the Isles, a host of more than three score years and ten keeps green those traditions of hospitality which in bygone days distinguished the MacNeils of Barra when they dwelt at Eoligarry : the return journey from North Bay to Castlebay terminates in

a typical Hebridean village, where history and romance are commingled in pleasing proportion, where the people is kindly, and where the way to the indweller's heart is the open door that leads to his peat-fire flame, and to the warmth and sincerity of his Highland home.

XXIV

EOLIGARRY

AN OLD HEBRIDEAN HOME

SEQUESTERED in one of the green folds that constitute the region stretching eastward from the foot of Ben Eoligarry to the shadowy Sound separating Barra from Eriskay, and reached by a white, sandy road that from the Tràigh Mhór or "Great Shore" threads indifferently in three parallel lines through the rolling pasture-lands comprising the major portion of the peninsula of Kilbar, stands old Eoligarry House, an edifice occasionally designated Barra House. This is the largest building, either inhabited or uninhabited, in all the Isle of Barra. Its windows, entrance, and corridors are characterised by fine freestone, the like of which is not to be found anywhere in the Hebrides, except perhaps in the walls of Stornoway Castle. This freestone is supposed to have been brought from the neighbourhood of the Clyde in pre-railway days.

Eoligarry House was erected towards the close of the eighteenth century by the MacNeils of Barra. Thither the Chief and his retinue repaired some time after they had evacuated Kisimul Castle. It is said that, having deserted Kisimul while Eoligarry House was in course of completion, the MacNeils resided temporarily at Borge, and at a place still known as Dùn an t-Sleibhe, and also at Vaslan.

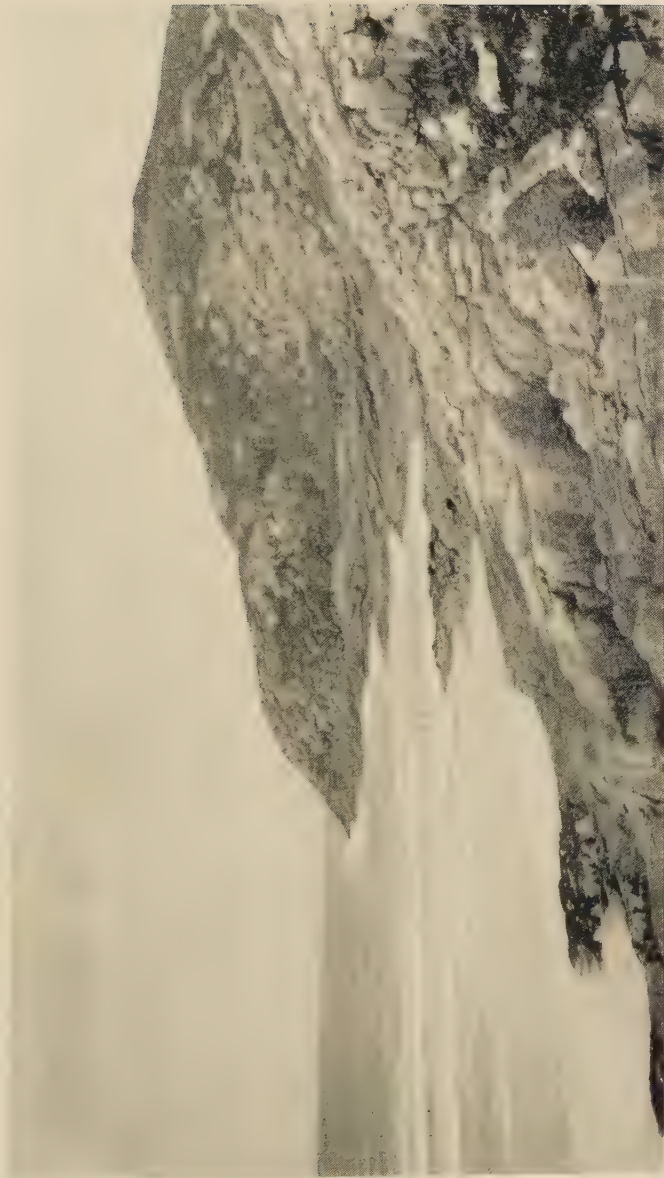
The White Road to Eoligarry

The wanderer among the Isles, who for the first time lingers across the great cockle-beds of Barra at ebb tide to meet the white road that meanders through the primrosed undulations of Eoligarry, is not a little astonished when the broad, lichen-covered roof of Eoligarry House comes into view. In approaching this edifice, its magnitude tends to impress itself upon one to an almost disproportionate degree. This may be due partly to the fact that, apart from a number of slated dwellings of the suburban or villa type in Castlebay, most of the houses in the Island of Barra are such as one is inclined to associate more readily with the typical Hebridean croft—houses which are neat and comfortable in themselves, but which, for obvious reasons, lack the altitude that renders Eoligarry House so imposing a structure.

I doubt whether Kisimul Castle in its halcyon days was as large and commodious as is Eoligarry House. The only rival to the latter in point of size (and it is by no means a serious rival) is the old manse in the hollow at Cuier, and removed from the Parish Church of Barra only a few hundred yards. The manse is not nearly so lofty as Eoligarry House ; but the low wings, spreading on either side of the central structure, afford more spacious accommodation than at the outset one might be disposed to believe it possessed.

Destroyed by Fire

Eoligarry House became a residence of Colonel Gordon of Cluny when, in December 1840, he purchased the



DÙN SCURRIVAL AND THE WESTERN SEA.

Island of Barra (the area of which is estimated roughly at 22,000 acres) for £38,000 from the MacNeils, to whom this ancient property had belonged from time immemorial.

Some eighty years ago much of the house was destroyed by fire. When being rebuilt, the roof, that heretofore had been flat, was replaced by the present one, which, being lofty and steep, adds considerably to the altitudinal appearance of the whole building. In former years the massive urns, that to-day are to be found at the gate and about the entrance, supplied an artistic finish to the corners of the flat roof.

Eoligarry House contains a fine old staircase ; and the lofty, spacious rooms of it are almost weirdly reminiscent of the MacNeils of Barra, and the bygone sumptuousness of their feasting-board.

A Walled Garden

Adjoining old Eoligarry House, and declining gently to the east, is the immense walled garden wherein to-day long, stifling grasses and weeds have, perforce, displaced most of the horticulture of a generation or two ago. Yet woodbine still scrambles over the southern wall ; and the old apple-tree, planted by the late General MacNeil of Barra, annually bears a moderate crop of fruit. Nevertheless, the observation recorded in the *New Statistical Account* with regard to fruit trees is as true of Barra to-day as it was in 1840—namely, “ fruit trees, when lined to garden walls, thrive well, and yield excellent fruit, but not otherwise.”

Should you visit this garden in July, you will certainly find a number of old-fashioned Scotch roses, fuchsias in prolific flower, and a tree bearing a few unripe pears. At

this season of the year a multitude of starlings besieges the couple of dwarfed plane-trees situated in the north-west corner of the garden, and the other few stunted trees and shrubs dotted here and there about it. In the centre of the garden stands an ancient sundial, lending to this wilderness-like place a suggestion of silence and veneration—a suggestion of something old, and very far off.

The plant which thrives at Eoligarry to an almost unbelievable extent is the primrose. The whole of the pastures covering Ben Eoligarry to its very summit are smothered in primrose plants. So numberless are they, in fact, that one can hardly take a step without treading upon them. I have gathered a healthy bunch of primroses in the vicinity of Eoligarry House as late as September.

My host at Eoligarry—William Lachlan MacGillivray to name—tells me that thirty or forty years ago great crops of gooseberries and currants could be raised in his garden. These were the days when gardeners used to come over from the mainland to the Outer Hebrides, and spend the best part of a lifetime in the employment of tacksmen at such places as Eoligarry.

Change in Climate

When the late Dr. MacGillivray, the father of the present tenant, came over from Ormacleit to rent the farm of Eoligarry from the MacNeils of Barra, the profusion and variety of flowers and fruit grown in the garden rivalled that of almost any mainland garden. During the occupancy of General MacNeil, the walled garden was deemed one of the sights of the Hebrides. Nowadays black cattle thrive better at Eoligarry than do flowers or fruit.

Since those times climatic conditions throughout the Western Isles have altered considerably. The winters have become more severe ; and the summers are less conducive to the growth of flowers and fruit-bearing shrubs. Frost and snow, high winds and storms occur at unseasonable periods ; while long spells of fine, dry weather are but a memory of the past.

This climatic change has had a marked effect on the ornithology of the Barra Isles. Although the peninsula of Kilbar is still renowned for its birds, neither in number nor in variety does the bird life of to-day compare with that to be found at Eoligarry even fifteen years ago.

Another indication that weather conditions have changed in these parts is illustrated by the truth that for weeks on end, even in summer, a small lugsail cannot venture from Eoligarry or Saltinish across the Oitir Mhór as far as Hirivagh or Bruernish.

That meteorological conditions now prevailing in Barra have altered in recent years is borne out further by the fact that the herring fishing is not prosecuted as and where it once was. Mr. MacGillivray recalls quite distinctly when from the summit of Ben Eoligarry one might discern as many as a hundred and fifty fishing-boats operating simultaneously in the bay stretching from Ard Greian to Dùn Scurrival, and within a mile of the shore. Nowadays never a boat sets her nets off this part of the Barra coast. It was the herrings caught on the west side that in the olden days gave to Barra its reputation as a fishing centre. The same is true of the west coast of the Lewis. Seldom does a boat come into Carloway these days, though once upon a time great catches of fish were landed there.

The grounds off the west coast of Barra are not entirely

devoid of fish, however. Only the other day a great herring shoal was reported to have passed eastwards through the Sound of Barra.

“ For Waking of the Cows ”

My mention of black cattle at Eoligarry reminds one, incidentally, that even in olden times cattle used to be transported from Barra to the mainland marts. To this day the natives of Ardnamurchan apply the name of MacNeil's Bay to a spot not far from the Lighthouse at which MacNeil of Barra landed the live-stock intended for the Falkirk tryst and other cattle fairs. And a long and hazardous journey it must have been in early times ! Several West Highland lairds sent cattle to southern markets. The Dunvegan Charter Chest contains an account of certain disbursements made in 1670 “ by some one who had been south with cattle.” The account shows that total expenses incurred in droving during the entire journey amounted to no more than a hundred and sixty-seven pounds Scots—roughly thirteen pounds sterling. Among the several items enumerated are expenses incurred “ for two men yat turned home,” for meat and drink in Glen Quaich, for fording at Falkirk and elsewhere, the fee paid to the boatman, various dues, ferries for men and horses (the cattle swam !), expenses incurred in engaging two men out of Glen Elg, the fees of the chief drover and his subordinates, and payment made to a man at Glen Garry “ for waking of the cows ” in the early morning.



BEN CLIAT AND ARD GREIAN FROM THE WESTERN SIDE OF BEN EOLIGARRY.



THE RUINS OF KILBAR (CILLE-BHARRA), THE ANCIENT SEPULCHRE OF THE MACNEILS OF BARRA, SITUATED CLOSE TO EOLIGARRY HOUSE.

An Ancient Broch

Two hills, neither of which attain an altitude of 400 feet, shelter Eoligarry, and much of Kilbar generally, from the Atlantic gales—to wit, Ben Eoligarry which rises 338 feet to the south-west of Eoligarry House, and Ben Scurrival in the north, whose height above sea-level is only 255 feet. Roughly midway between them, and occupying a commanding position overlooking the Tràigh Uais and the Atlantic seaboard as far as Ard Greian, are the ruins of the galleried broch known as Dùn Scurrival. Not much remains to be seen of this ancient *dùn*, its interior having collapsed inwards, as have the interiors of many of these brochs. To-day Dùn Scurrival is the resort of sheep, and of an occasional crofter, recently settled around Eoligarry by the Board of Agriculture, who goes thither with horse-drawn sledge in order to convey stones and boulders of suitable shape and dimensions to the spot where he may intend erecting a new byre or house. Much of the site of Dùn Scurrival is smothered in nettles and thistles, in sea-pinks and iris flags.

None of the Barra Isles is entirely deficient in pre-historic remains. Scarcely an island is there between Barra Head (Berneray), in the south, and Fuday, in the north, that does not exhibit traces of at least one archæological structure. For a full account of the archæology of the Western Isles one would be well advised to consult the inventory of ancient and historical monuments and constructions in the Outer Hebrides, Skye, and the Small Isles. This inventory was issued recently (1928). It is highly illustrated ; and in some respects it may be regarded

as the most acceptable production that has emanated from the Stationery Office for many a year.

“ Embryoes of Cockles ”

Although Ben Eoligarry attains an altitude of less than 400 feet, under fair auspices one may review the southern Hebrides from it as from few places. Near the summit of this hill is the well that, according to Martin Martin, Gent.—and, indeed, to George Buchanan and Dean Monro at earlier dates—throws up “ embryoes of cockles.”

From Ben Eoligarry one may see the islands of Gighay, Hellisay, Flodday, Fuiay, and the innumerable islets that in common with them bound the great cockle-beds of the Oitir Mhór to the south and east. The Isle of Orosay and the township of Saltinish nestle close at hand ; and to the north-east lie Fuday and Eriskay, and the soft, soothing hills of South Uist, undulating in mystic blues and purples beyond the Sound of Barra. Even on a dull day one can discern the white walls of the inn at Poll a' Charra (Pollachar), where terminates the road traversing South Uist to the southward, down by the sea to the west of the Sound of Eriskay. Half-way between Ben Eoligarry and Pollachar Inn “ lyes ane ile callit Lingay, haffe a myle lange, ane verey guide ile for gressing, pastures, and for sheiling, pertaining to M'Neill of Barray.”

A Leaguelessness of Sea

To the south-west of Ben Eoligarry, Ard Greian thrusts itself out to meet the blue swell of the Atlantic, and the white breakers that tumble in upon this rock-bound coast ;

and to the west of it stretch the sands and sand-dunes of the Tràigh Uais, and leagues upon leagues of sea. Dùn Scurrival, Ben Scurrival, and Scurrival Point diversify the welter of ocean to the north and north-west. Beyond them lies Fiaray, an island "namit be the Erische Feray, haffe ane myle lange, guid in corne and gersing, and excellent for fisching, pertaining to M'Neill of Barray." Removed half a mile is Fiaray from Port an Lodain, the northernmost point of the Isle of Barra.

On a clear day St. Kilda can be seen from Ben Eoligarry ; and the great panorama sweeping across the other side, with the hills of Uist and the Coolins of Skye, with Canna, Rum, Eigg, and Muck, with Ben More in Mull, and Ardnamurchan, with Coll and Tiree, make me inquire why I ever suffer myself to live an hour in cities where the horizon is so visionless and circumscribed, and where, night and day, men are crushing the very soul out of one another in their overweening ambition to make money by any and every conceivable duplicity. How little the innocent know of what men do in the name of "business," and for the sake of a few paltry pence !

The Wild Flowers of Eoligarry

In respect of variety and profusion, the wild flowers that in June and July cover acres and acres of Tiree, the ancient granary of Iona, are rivalled by the wild flowers that almost smother the low-lying pasture-lands situated to the north of Eoligarry House, and continuing down toward Saltinish, and round the Tràigh Scurrival to Port an Lodain. Doubtless, the wealth of vegetation characterising this region in the height of summer is due very largely to the

agricultural innovations introduced by the MacNeils who, while in residence at Eoligarry House, highly improved much of the land in this neighbourhood. Ragged-robin, wild thyme, lady's-smock, marsh mallows, orchids, vetch, clover, galium or lady's-bedstraw, silverweed, buttercups, irises, daisies, and bird's-foot trefoil are but a few of the plants growing luxuriantly among the pastures of Eoligarry in the summer-time.

The Ruins of Kilbar

Kilbar is the name of the peninsula forming the northern portion of the Isle of Barra. Located within a few hundred yards of Eoligarry House, and impinging on the sandy road leading thither from the Tràigh Mhór or Great Shore of Barra, are the ruins of the religious edifices and the old graveyard of Kilbar (*Cille-bharra*). It is held by some that both the Parish Church of Barra and the principal ecclesiastical structures in the Island were called after St. Barr, and that Kilbar was named after this Saint.

The association of Kilbar with Barra conveys us back to a remote period in the history of the Church in the Western Isles. At the time of Dean Monro's circuit (1594), Barra boasted "ane paroche kirke, namit Killbare." A hundred years later we find Martin writing as follows of St. Barr and his Church :

"The church in this island is called Kilbarr, *i.e.*, St. Barr's Church. There is a little chapel by it, in which MacNeil and those descended of his family are usually interred. The natives have St. Barr's wooden image standing on the altar, covered with linen in form of a shirt ; all their greatest asservations are by this saint. I came

very early in the morning with an intention to see this image, but was disappointed ; for the natives prevented me by carrying it away, lest I might take occasion to ridicule their superstition, as some Protestants have done formerly ; and when I was gone it was again exposed on the altar. They have several traditions concerning this great saint. There is a chapel (about half a mile on the south side of the hill near St. Barr's Church) where I had occasion to get an account of a tradition concerning this saint, which was thus : ' The inhabitants having begun to build the church, which they dedicated to him, they laid this wooden image within it, but it was invisibly transported (as they say) to the place where the church now stands, and found there every morning.' This miraculous conveyance is the reason they give for desisting to work where they first began. I told my informer that this extraordinary motive was sufficient to determine the case, if true, but asked his pardon to dissent from him, for I had not faith enough to believe this miracle, at which he was surprised, telling me in the meantime that this tradition had been faithfully conveyed by the priests and natives successively to this day."

The Festival of St. Barr

That as late as the middle of the nineteenth century St. Barr was held in profound veneration by the people of Barra is borne out by the fact that 25th September was set aside as an annual festival to his memory. " On that day all the Roman Catholic population convene in their chapel in the forenoon to hear mass, from whence they set off to Kilbar, each man riding his small pony, with his wife or

favourite lass mounted behind him ; who, after riding thrice round the sacred edifice, return to the place from whence they set out. The females provide, beforehand, quantities of wild field carrots for this occasion, with which they treat their partners."

On the religious ruins close to Eoligarry House the *New Statistical Account* delivers itself as under : " Each of these has an altar of rough stones in one end, and the pedestal of a cross stands at a short distance from the buildings. These churches were dedicated to St. Barr ; and of old a wooden figure of the saint was stuck up for the adoration of the deluded people. This figure was dressed up in its best habiliments on the saint's anniversary, and we are credibly informed that it was customary for persons proceeding on a journey to make some present to the saint of clothes or linen, to insure prosperity to their undertakings. No trace of this figure is now to be seen."

The burial-place at Kilbar contains a few recumbent slabs, one or two of which are wrought in the familiar Celtic interlacing pattern. The improbability that such designs were fashioned in Barra has given rise to the suggestion that possibly they were brought over from some pillaged burying-place on the mainland. True it is that at any rate *one* of the MacNeil chiefs was interred in Kilbar, at Eoligarry.

The Passing of the Tacksman

My first visit to Eoligarry was paid under sunny auspices. Finding myself at Crannag at noon one day in August, a year or two ago, I was tempted to speed across the shell-bestrewn ridges of the Tràigh Mhór on my bicycle, in order to obtain some idea of Eoligarry, a part of Barra of

which I had heard so much from the older natives of Castlebay.

A deluge of rain accompanied me on my second excursion some little time later. On this visit I discovered my host making mental preparations for his journey to a forthcoming Mòd at Oban, and recapitulating in his mind all the old cronies he was likely to be meeting at that assembly. On a table, that he believes to have belonged to the MacNeils of Barra, he dined me well—so well, in sooth, that, being escorted by no Boswell, I was in even greater danger of forgetting that I was ever to depart from Eoligarry than was Dr. Johnson at Dunvegan.

During our prolonged dining, Mr. MacGillivray discoursed at no short length on the doubtful economics of small-holdings, and on the days that preceded the breaking up of farms in the Highlands and Islands for the settlement of crofts on which, he contended, there was barely a living. And, furthermore, he argued that this change had been for the worse, in respect that it had interfered with the granting of that hospitality to which every wayfarer in the Isles was both welcome and accustomed. To-day there remain in the Outer Hebrides scarcely any tacksmen who are in a position to entertain in the old Highland style of a generation or two ago. And then, again, the average crofter—though he be ever so willing—can neither afford nor supply such accommodation as the casual sojourner felt himself entitled to beyond the threshold of the typical tacksmen in times gone by.

The Wells of Eoligarry

Like the quondam sheep-farm of Galson, in the Lewis (of which I told you strange things in *Behold the Hebrides* !),

the greater part of the farm of Eoligarry has been broken up into small-holdings. However, the present tenant has a liferent of Eoligarry House. There is no saying what may be the fate of this place on his demise.

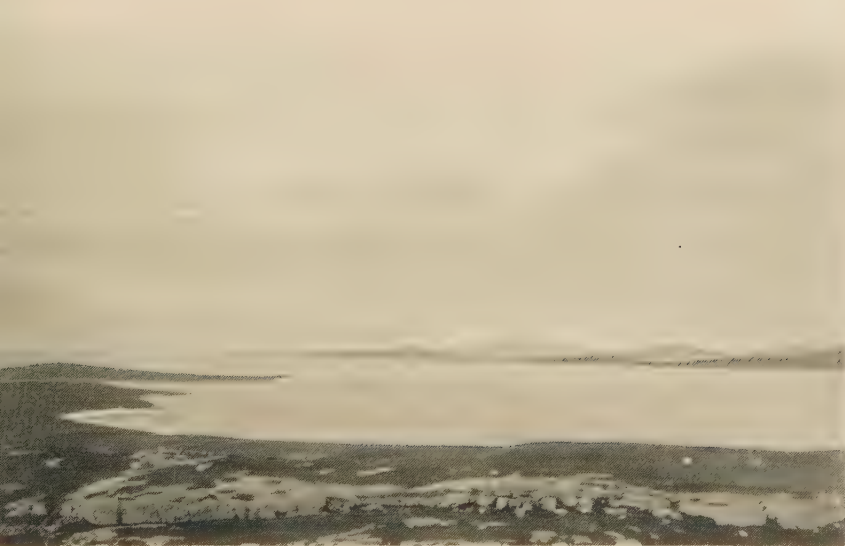
One of the difficulties experienced in settling new tenants at Eoligarry has been the absence of a plentiful supply of fresh water. Apart from the Well of Kilbar, whence, as aforementioned, the cockles found in such immense quantities on the Tràigh Mhór were supposed to have been carried down, the Well of St. Mary and the Well of St. Barr are the only reliable sources of fresh water in this vicinity.

Among the Rolling Pasture-lands

I fancy Mr. MacGillivray must be a tacksman after the pattern of Lachlan MacKinnon of Coire Chatachan—that genial Highland host who at all times was ready to make welcome the stranger, and aye eager to be entertaining. As I came away from Eoligarry on this occasion, my host stood in the doorway, waving me a Highland adieu and a *beannachd*. And, when turning the bend of the sandy road just below the old churchyard of Kilbar, and passing out of the sight of him, I began to wonder and wonder whether I would ever be seeing him again—so remote, so secluded appeared this old Hebridean home, tucked away among the rolling pasture-lands of Eoligarry, to the northward of the Great Shore of Barra. But I have been to Eoligarry since ; and I am certain it's the road merging into the sands of the Tràigh Mhór that again will be calling me before long.



THE ISLAND OF FUDAY FROM BEN EOLIGARRY, WITH ERISKAY IN THE
DISTANCE.



THE NORTHERNMOST POINT OF BARRA, THE ISLE OF FIARAY, AND THE
MOUNTAINS OF SOUTH UIST, AS VIEWED FROM DÙN SCURRIVAL.

A Private Museum

Eoligarry House is old-world in several ways. Here you feel that the wheels of the clocks of time have not moved for a generation, having become clogged with the corrosion of age.

And the mention of clocks reminds me that the inmates of Eoligarry House have exhibited no liking for William Willet's "summer-time," and prefer to abide by the solar time that suited the requirements of their fathers.

Within Eoligarry House you will find the finest private natural history museum in all the Highlands and Islands. It is barely credible that in Barra alone one could make so varied a collection of birds and mammals, eggs and shells, moths and butterflies. Yet most of the specimens to be seen at Eoligarry House are indigenous to the Island. As might be expected of the nephew of the late William MacGillivray, who was Professor of Natural History in Marischal College, Aberdeen, my host at Eoligarry is an authority on ornithology, and has made not a few valuable presentations of birds and eggs to various natural history museums.

The Harmony of Old Things

As for the old house itself, its lovely, big rooms contain a great deal that is mellow and memory-laden. Hung upon the walls of the spotless drawing-room are old pictures and old prints and old photographs, some of which bear the likeness to Hebridean chieftains of other days. Athwart the table lies a scabbardless claymore; and in a corner of the room a shepherd's crook. An old harmonium,

a piano still older, an old-fashioned gun are in consonance with the atmosphere of this place. Books and albums—some new and some very old—neatly set out on a table behind the door, lend their tone of lore and veneration to this harmony. Many of these volumes have, indeed, a musty smell about them, conveying to the touching of them something that is sacred and irretrievably far off.

Carefully arranged on a crimson cover at one end of the table rests a great pile of newspapers and periodicals, most of which still bear the postal wrappers upon them. Artistically sewn in between two fragments of MacGillivray tartan is a piece of linen made by my host's mother in the days when great quantities of flax were grown at Eoligarry. On either side of a large window a sash of MacGillivray tartan is draped against the white linen curtain; and tassels of MacNeil tartan decorate the "spotted pipes" (*piob bhreac*) that are made of apple-wood, bone, and ivory, and are believed to have been played at Culloden.

Drowsy Bumble-bees

The woodwork of Eoligarry House—doors, skirtings, window-sills, mantel-shelves, shutters—once painted white, is to-day sufficiently faded to add an old-world mellowness to the whole interior. And there's an air of indescribable peacefulness about Eoligarry House when the summer sun is high in his vault of azure and the wind asleep, and when a few stray bumble-bees, having found ingress by the open window, are dozing on the hearthrug forment the fireplace, or crawling dreamily upon the window-sill.

Nightfall at Eoligarry

In the faint glimmer of the dusky autumn twilight the *Cygnets* may be seen from the windows of Eoligarry House as she steams Lochboisdale-wards between Gighay and the Stack Isles, passing by the crumbling *dùn* known as the Weaver's Castle. And it's the old people living on Eriskay who will speak with you of the weaver who, in conveying stones to the site of his Castle, so overworked a white horse that the poor beast never recovered. For a time the weaver engaged successfully in piracy ; but eventually he became so troublesome that the inhabitants of the adjacent Isles united with the object of dislodging him. And on a night that there was, the weaver, unaccompanied, sallied forth from his stronghold, and was slain by those who lay in wait for him.

The shades of a splendour departed permeate Eoligarry at eventide. Then it is that the faded woodwork lends a mellifluous timbre to the whispered word, and the atmosphere of this old, Hebridean home is laden with things unseen, and the old, unchanging loves of an old people.

At nightfall there is about Eoligarry a muteness quickening the quiet dust of an ancient race, and a silence almost sacramental.

XXV

FRANCES TOLMIE

BARDESS AND SEANNACHIE

WITH the last day of the year 1926 there passed away at Dunvegan, in the Isle of Skye, and in the person of Frances Tolmie, one whose name will be remembered long throughout the Highlands and Hebrides for her lifelong efforts to resuscitate the Gaelic cultus, and to preserve the dying and, indeed, half-forgotten songs and traditions of an ancient people.

For those of us who are jealous for our traditions, and would give much to revive the olden spirit of romance and chivalry, it was fortunate that Miss Tolmie's researches in Gaelic folk-song and legend should have fallen coincidentally with a radical change in the structure of Highland society—a change that, alas ! swept away a great deal of what is dearest to a people. Frances Tolmie began her labour of love very long ago, and just at the time when the Highlands were in need of bards and seannachies who would commemorate such precious fragments of their heritage as were still to be found at the sheiling, and round the hearth of the moorland croft.

Lieutenants of the Coast against Clan Ranald

But, in order to understand the spiritual make-up of this grand, old, Highland lady, and in order to appreciate

to the fullest degree the nature and scope of her work, it will be necessary for me to tell you something of the wide circle of friends among which she moved, as well as of the ancestry from which she inherited her knowledge and her love of the homeland.

Frances Tolmie was the youngest daughter of John Tolmie, tacksman of Uiginish, Skiniden, and Colbost. She was born in the old house of Uiginish, in the Parish of Duirinish, in October of 1840. Her mother was Margaret Hope MacAskill, daughter of Dr. Donald MacAskill of Eigg, by his wife, Jean Campbell. Thus it was that she traced her descent through the Campbells of Edinample to the House of Glen Orchy, and even to Margaret, the sainted queen of Malcolm Ceann Mór. Her grand-uncle, Captain Allan MacAskill, the discoverer of hitherto uncharted islands in the Pacific, was a navigator of no small account. On his retirement he purchased the estate of Morinish in Mull, and erected Calgary Castle, now the property of Mr. Munro MacKenzie.

The MacAskills of Skye, you will remember, were hereditary Lieutenants of the Coast to MacLeod of MacLeod against the predatory raids of the Lochlannaich from the northern shores, and the punitive expeditions to "MacLeod's Country" of the Clan Ranald.

Miss Tolmie's maternal great-grandmother was Mary MacLean of the Coll family. She married the Rev. Malcolm MacAskill, the first Presbyterian minister of Eigg. Mary was a charming and a gifted woman; and it is chiefly through her that Frances Tolmie is supposed to have inherited that sense of the beautiful with which she was so strongly endowed.

William Tolme and Lady Grange

According to tradition, the Tolmies (or Tolm and Tolme, as the name used to be spelt) came to the Western Isles from Scandinavia with the progenitors of the great MacLeods. They are a sept of the MacLeods of Lewis and the MacLeods of Gairloch ; and anciently they were known as the "Tolmich Mhór." Their connection with Dunvegan dates back to the sixteenth century when, on the dispersal of their sept from Gairloch by the MacKenzies, they sought and received the protection of the Chief of MacLeod. Since that time the Tolmies have occupied various positions of trust. It was Frances Tolmie's great-grandfather, William Tolme (*Uilleam Mór*), who took over Lady Grange from the representatives of Simon, Lord Lovat, at the clachan of Glen Elg in 1732. The pathetic story is told of how, in a letter to her friends, the unfortunate captive mentioned that the only kindness she had experienced since her abduction was at the hands of William Tolme, who had charge of her while she passed through "MacLeod's Country" to the territory of the MacDonalds in North Uist.

In the early eighteenth century, when the XIXth Chief of the MacLeods came of age, William Tolme accompanied him from Fortrose to Dunvegan in order to take charge of important works which the former contemplated. He afterwards became factor to MacLeod of MacLeod for his lands in Skye, Glen Elg, and Harris, and occupied this position till his death in 1754. His son and grandson (Miss Tolmie's father) were, in turn, tacksmen of Uiginish Farm. Frances Tolmie had a further connection with the

Lewis in that her paternal grandmother was a member of the Carn family (MacKenzie) which produced two distinguished men.

Her Tales of Rudh' an Dunain

Frances Tolmie was only four years of age when her father died, and when the care of her mother and brothers and sisters was taken over by her uncle, Hugh MacAskill, who at that time was tacksman of Talisker. Hugh's wife, Jessie, was the eldest daughter of Lauchlan MacKinnon of Coire Chatachan, that gallant Highland *duin' uasal* of whom I told you so much in *Over the Sea to Skye*. Hugh and his spouse took a leading part in the social life of the Isle of Skye; and their hospitality (as was the hospitality of Coire Chatachan) was enjoyed by a wide circle of literary and other friends from all parts of the kingdom. Now it was in this atmosphere that Frances Tolmie spent her early years; and it was her contact with these literati that made so profound an impression upon her. At the early age of ten she made herself familiar with the folklore of Skye and the Hebrides generally, and commenced to record those ancient tales of a people, among whose descendants her name is a household word.

Eventually the MacAskills removed from Talisker to Rudh' an Dunain, that wild Headland of the Little Dun stretching seaward from Glen Brittle as if to meet the Isle of Canna. And it was here that she learned her strange stories of the Lieutenants of the Coast, of the vagrant robber-woman, of Iain Mór MacAskill, and of how Donald Dubh with a bow and twelve arrows frustrated a raid of the Clan Ranald.

The middle of last century found Frances Tolmie with her brother at Strontian, where he was minister ; but on her brother's translation to Bracadale in 1856 she once again returned to her folklore researches in her native Isle. It was then that she started her work in real earnest, moving freely among the Islesfolk, and noting every traditional tale and tune that reached her ears.

When the late Miss Emily MacLeod of MacLeod founded a knitting industry among the crofters on the Chief's estates, Miss Tolmie was appointed superintendent ; and it was in this capacity that she came into contact most intimately with the people of Skye. In the course of her duties she visited the houses of the crofters, where she discovered ample material for enlarging her collection of folklore and song.

A Peculiar Old Woman

Among the many natives of Skye who were associated with Frances Tolmie in her work was one, Oighrig Ross to name. Oighrig used to escort her when she visited the crofts of Bracadale and Minginish, and tell her such weird tales of the supernatural. Many a fragment from the lips of Oighrig Ross did Frances Tolmie preserve. It was Oighrig who, "when talking of the beauty of the world one day, confessed to having gone down on her knees to a magnificent cloud overhead, stating her conviction that in doing so she had not committed a sin." It was from the lips of Oighrig that she learnt her rendering of the legends of the Faery Flag.

Oighrig, though she knew that she was a native of the district of Skye known as Vaternish, could not tell you the



FRANCES TOLMIE, BARDESS AND SEANNACHIE (1840-1926).

year of her birth : when asked her age, her reply was that she was born in the year in which a poor woman, while herding cattle, fell over the rocks at Vaternish and was drowned.

But, though she knew not the year of her birth, Oighrig was conversant with the augury of the birds in their flight ; and she could tell you of the sun's journeyings, of the stars in their courses, of the winds, of the tides, of the changes of the moon.¹

Frances Tolmie returns to Skye

In addition to her activities in the Hebrides, Miss Tolmie travelled extensively in France, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, and Spain. While in these countries she took the opportunity of making excursions into comparative folklore and folksong. She also resided for a time in the Lake District. There she came in contact with Ruskin and others whose sympathies and interests were similar to her own. In 1894 she removed to Oban ; and some years later she went to reside with her sister in Edinburgh. On the death of her sister in 1915, she decided to return to her native Isle, and to spend her latter days amid the scenes of her early researches.

It was in my childhood that I made the acquaintance of Frances Tolmie—in the days when my old father used to take me down to the Gaelic Church of St. Oran. And the friendship that sprung up then terminated for the time being with her death on the last day of 1926.

But my recollections of her are very real and very vivid. Many a *ceilidh* I enjoyed around her cosy hearth at Kilchoan, in Dunvegan ; and *Over the Sea to Skye*

¹ See *Over the Sea to Skye*, p. 57.

would be an empty book but for the tales and legends she told me there. Often do I regret that she had been so generous with her songs and stories, for I feel instinctively that, had she herself issued the results of her lifelong labour, she would have preserved—and in a form much less artificial and “popularised” than that in which they are current at the present day—many traditional legends and melodies.

Sisera and his Nine Hundred Chariots

And I can see this grand old lady in my vision now ; and I remember so well how, like a silent spirit, she would steal across the floor of her firelit sitting-room at nightfall, to finger out on her old-fashioned piano a forgotten *òran*, and to lilt the line of some fragmentary rune of long ago.

On one occasion she withheld from me a certain story concerning the Hereditary Physicians to the Lords of the Isles until I expressed my willingness to be put “under *geasa*.” And, shame upon me ! I remembered to fulfil only half my undertaking !

And I recall how, when I would be preparing to return to the Castle after a night’s ceilidhing at Kilchoan, she would lay her benedictine hand upon my shoulder. “*Éisd thu, Alasdair*, it’s Sisera and his nine hundred chariots that are abroad on Creag a’ Chlachain to-night !” she would say, when the winds were rushing among the rocks of the lately distimbered slopes facing her home at Dunvegan.

The Blue Men of the Minch

Than Frances Tolmie’s letters I have never read anything more poetic, more charming. It’s glad I am now

that I had the foresight to keep all the communications she sent me from time to time. Some of them are long and a little complicated : others are short and to the point. Of the latter, the following sentence, neatly written on a postcard, is typical of one whose mind dwelt on happy things, and who was thoroughly in love with her tradition :

“ Regarding Iain Mór MacAskill, meantime I have nothing further to commemorate.”

Her vocabularies, English and Gaelic, were limitless ; and the aptness with which she selected her words and phrased her sentences, even in her eighty-sixth year, was amazing. In many respects her outlook was more modern than that of the millions living in the throes of modernity.

Many a time I wrote to Frances Tolmie when in doubt about some historical or legendary detail. When one day I met a man, who claimed to have invented the story of the Blue Men of the Minch, I wrote to her in double haste, asking for any evidence whereby I might refute this claim. By return of post came a communication that put my mind at ease on this matter. And, further to the Blue Men of the Minch, there arrived a few weeks later the following short and unexpected letter :

“ DUNVEGAN, ISLE OF SKYE.

“ MY DEAR ALASDAIR :

“ A hurried *sgròb* to tell you that I am not hearing a thing about the Blue Men these days.

“ Affectionately yours,

“ FRANCES TOLMIE.”

Frances Tolmie was a real Isleswoman. She was tall and stately, dignified and gentle. Her bearing was queenly ;

and her speech exemplified the inimitable power of the spoken word. I doubt not that she was in the direct line of the kings and queens of ancient Alba.

And she passed on when four score years and seven were upon her. And, inclement as was the weather, a great concourse of people laid her to rest with her kindred, among the Chieftains of Siol Thormoid, in the old-world burying-place of Kilmuir, in Dunvegan.

Woe is me ! her day and generation are gone ; and she journeys hence as the last of her race, taking with her much poetry and song.

But for the mollifying influence of the very few people like her, but for the deep-rooted conviction that such partings are only temporal, life for many of us would be wellnigh insufferable.

*Thig crìoch air an t-saoghal ;
Ach mairidh gaol 'us ceòl.*

APPENDIX

THE GEOLOGY OF THE BARRA ISLES

General Succession of Rock Formations.—The rocks of the Barra Isles belong to the Archæan Complex. They resemble in most respects the rocks of the western seaboard of Sutherland and Ross, which underlie the Torridon sandstone, and are usually regarded as being the oldest rocks in the British Isles; and they are composed of various types of gneiss, all of which appear to be of igneous origin. So far, no undoubted instance of paragneiss has been noted in the Barra Isles. Intrusions, generally in the form of granulites, have penetrated the ortho-gneisses; and along the margin of these granulitic intrusions a schistose structure has been superinduced. The ortho-gneisses are traversed by bands and veins of coarse-grained pegmatites, which are quartzo-felspathic in composition. They weather red or white, vary greatly in size, and trend in all directions—though the more massive bands usually run E. and W. All the rocks mentioned above have been affected by zones of subsequent shearing, along which mylonisation and the creation of flinty-crush phenomena can be traced to a greater or lesser extent. At later stages igneous dykes, generally trending N.W. and S.E. (though some run E. and W.), are not uncommon.

The Barra Isles, particularly along their coasts, exhibit conspicuous evidences of glaciation, such as accumulations

of glacial drift, striæ, striation, *roches moutonnées*, and perched and erratic boulders of gneiss.

The Ortho-gneisses.—Differing considerably in composition and texture, the ortho-gneisses of the Barra Isles are biotite and hornblende gneisses, varying in colour from pink to light grey, dark grey, and black. In the more acid types, muscovite commonly accompanies biotite. Both rhombic and monoclinic pyroxenes are found in certain types.

The prevalent gneisses generally strike N.N.W. and S.S.E., with the dip of the foliation planes to the E.N.E., and at angles of from 20° to 40° . Occasional variations in the direction of the strike are due to a later gentle folding, as, for example, in the south-west of Barra, in the north-west of Vatersay, in the south-west of Mingulay, and in the Island of Berneray. In each of these instances the axis of the fold runs N.W. and S.E. In Sandray, where there is also a sudden change in the amount of dip, lines of shear affect the direction of strike. On Barra, Vatersay, and Sandray the dip is inclined to be steeper on the eastern side than on the western. North-east of Castlebay, north of Bruernish, and again in the vicinity of Scurrival Point, it actually approaches the vertical. On the western side of Sandray the dip of the foliation is low; and in the case of the flat-topped islet of Flodday, lying a couple of miles to the west of it, the foliation planes are almost horizontal.

Garnetiferous Biotite- and Hornblende-gneisses.—The ortho-gneisses of the Barra Isles include hornblende rock, basic hornblende-gneisses, acid gneisses, banded gneisses, and garnetiferous biotite- and hornblende-gneisses. The pink gneisses of Fuday and of the north-west of Barra are biotite-gneiss and muscovite-biotite-gneiss respectively.

Near the reservoir, in the Glen, is another specimen of

muscovite-biotite-gneiss, containing quartz, albite, orthoclase, and subordinate micas (biotite and muscovite), along with accessory magnetite.

Garnetiferous hornblende-gneiss occurs on the Island of Muldoanich, where the garnets are conspicuous, though they appear to be very irregularly distributed, and to have been much shattered. A band of coarse garnetiferous biotite-gneiss, containing equally conspicuous garnets, is to be seen on the north-west coast of Barra. This band is only twenty feet in thickness ; and its foliation is parallel to that of the gneisses in which it is included.

Intrusions into the Ortho-gneisses.—Excellent examples are found of intrusions into the ortho-gneisses of hornblende granulites and pyroxene granulites, which types not infrequently are cut by pegmatites. Intrusions of hornblende granulites are met with at the south end of Mingulay, at the north-east of Vatersay, and at Borge Point, on the main Island of Barra. Intrusions of pyroxene granulites are less common, and more restricted in distribution. They have been observed on the east of Bruernish, on the east coast immediately south of Loch Obe, on the islets east of Barra, and in the north-east of Vatersay.

Pegmatites.—The latest members of the Archæan Complex consist of bands and veins of grey and pink pegmatites, varying in width from a few inches to several feet, and assuming different positions relatively to the gneisses and other components of the Complex into which they obviously are intrusive. Pegmatites are abundant at Uinessan in Vatersay, and also on the west coast of Vatersay. Some splendid examples may be seen at the north end of Mingulay, and also on the Island of Fuday, where sometimes they are found running parallel to the foliation. The

pegmatites at Crubisdale, in Fuday, were noted by MacCulloch as containing oxidulous iron. They are pink in colour, and consist chiefly of microline, a little quartz, and biotite. They contain substantial traces of magnetite.

Crush-zones and Crush-rocks.—Zones of shearing, due to earth movements, are a prominent feature of the rocks of the Archæan Complex. Along these lines the rocks have been crushed, brecciated, reduced to mylonites, and even to the condition of flinty-crush-rock. As an extreme stage of the process it sometimes can be shown that the finely ground material has been fused. In this state it behaves intrusively to the surrounding rocks, ramifying through them in thin veins. On cooling, this material sometimes shows traces of re-crystallisation simulating an igneous rock. This extreme product of crushing has been called pseudo-tachylite. Examples of such "trap-shotten gneiss" are met with in Berneray, Mingulay, Pabbay, Sandray, Vatersay, and in Barra itself. Though it is not always possible to determine the directions of the movements by which crush phenomena were produced, the main crushed belt runs nearly N. and S., having been produced probably by movements from the E. and S.E. Excellent examples of these rocks may be seen on the shore E. of the pier at Castlebay, and on the slopes N. of the hotel. East of the pier at Castlebay is a massive development of flinty-crush-rock which, at first sight, resembles an intrusive basalt. All types of gneiss and pegmatites appear to have been affected by crush movements, since they demonstrate evidences of brecciation, granulitisation, and mylonitisation. They therefore must be later in age than any member of the Archæan Complex, though earlier than the dykes, next described.



AT THE PEACE OF EVENTIDE—FUDAY AND ERISKAY AS SEEN FROM THE ISLE OF OROSAY.

Dykes of Later Age.—The latest intrusions all appear to occur in the form of dykes, most of which belong presumably to Tertiary times. These dykes show few signs of disturbance, and are widely distributed throughout the Barra Isles. Their general trend is N.W. to S.E. In breadth they vary from less than an inch to over a hundred feet towards the north-east, where they become larger and more numerous until (as in the case of Gighay) they almost equal the amount of gneiss seen on the ground. Common specimens are quartz dolerites, olivine dolerites, and crinanites. The high cliffs of Berneray and Mingulay show the influence of jointing in the gneiss. Being softer than the gneiss, later dykes are often cut out, forming *slocs*, caves, and tunnels—*e.g.*, on the west of Mingulay.

Glaciation.—Up to the very summits of the hills, especially on the eastern slopes, the Barra Isles bear evidences of intense glaciation. The hills are rounded and smoothed, and display *roches moutonnées*. Undoubted glacial striæ, however, are not often preserved; but, where found, they occur on the darker gneisses, and occasionally on the later igneous dykes. Since the slope of the ground and the dip of the foliation planes almost coincide on Pabbay, Mingulay, and Berneray, and to some extent on the other islands also, glacial markings have tended to become obliterated owing to the fact that the surface of the gneiss on the dip slope has undergone a process of desquamation and sheet erosion. Well-preserved examples of striæ have been observed to the south of Crois an t-Suidheachan, in Mingulay, and east of the landing-place at Berneray. The former trends a little S. of W.: the latter trends S.W.

The striæ trend N.W. at the north-east end of Vatersay,

and N.N.W. at the south end of Muldoanich. Several striæ have been noted on Barra. The variation in the trend of the striæ is thought to have been due to local disturbance, as the general flow of the main ice movement seems to have been S.E. to N.W.

Glacial Drift.—No typical boulder clay has been found on the Barra Isles, though in places rubbly drift is not uncommon. Thin skins of the latter are located in Mingulay and Berneray. On the west side of Mingulay the removal of peat has resulted in the almost complete disappearance of a skin of rubbly drift. Several foreign boulders have been noted in this neighbourhood. Perched blocks and erratics are to be found everywhere. Foreign boulders are common on Sandray and Pabbay, though drift is not abundant on these Islands.

On the southern side of the Bàgh Siar, in Vatersay, drift occurs in cliffs exceeding twenty feet in height. Drift is also well exposed on the north and south sides of Vatersay Bay. Muldoanich is glaciated to its very summit; and this Island displays well-defined *roches moutonnées* on the eastern and southern sides. On Barra itself little drift has been found. One exposure is encountered at a gravel quarry to the east of Castlebay Hotel, and another at the northern end of the Tràigh Uais, in the north of Barra.

Perched Blocks and Erratics.—Boulders of rocks foreign to the Barra Isles are not numerous. Such as have been identified are more common in the southerly islets than in Barra and the islets lying to the north and east of it. Quartzites and sandstone are the commonest of these foreign boulders. In the shingle of the Tràigh Uais boulders of hardened chalk are present; and the sands of the Bàgh a' Deas, in the south of Vatersay, and a cliff of

drift on the east of Uinessan (also in Vatersay) contain some boulders of chalk flint. Everywhere among these Islands perched blocks of gneiss are to be found. North-west of Ard Mhór, in Barra, is a tremendous erratic known locally as Clach Mhór nan Gleannan.

The Island of Fuday displays neither evidences of drift nor of striæ, though it presents a smoothed moutonnéed aspect.

According to James Geikie, the whole of the Outer Hebrides was swept and ground by an ice-sheet streaming from the mainland and Skye, filling the Minch, and afterwards travelling across the islands in a north-westerly direction. Only altitudes exceeding 1,500 feet escaped the influences of this ice-sheet. The movement of the ice over the Barra Isles trended a little north of west. The unfossiliferous till is composed only of local materials. Excepting the northern part of Lewis, "the average character of the till is that of a greyish earthy or clayey grit, often hard, and always more or less thickly charged with blunted angular and sub-angular stones."¹

Sand and Sand-dunes.—Extensive dunes of wind-blown sand occur between the Tràigh Mhór and the Tràigh Uais, and on the west coast of Barra between Greian Head and Doirlinn Head. The two portions of Vatersay appear to be united by an isthmus of sand-dunes between the Bàgh Siar and Vatersay Bay. Sandray likewise exhibits a belt of sand-dunes; and, owing to solution and re-deposition of the CaCO_3 , calcareous blown sand in Pabbay has formed layers of impure limestone.

The north and west of Fuday also are characterised by dunes of blown sand. Here, in places, the gneiss is covered

¹ *The Great Ice Age*, pp. 82, 83.

over by shelly sand that has been consolidated and compacted into a firm sandstone.

The æolian sand forming the sand-dunes of Barra consists largely of comminuted shells. The prevailing south-west winds have driven the sand up the slopes on the western side to a height of several hundred feet. This shell-sand has improved the peaty soil vastly, and is responsible for the excellent pasturage of the machar-lands.

Evidences of Subsidence.—Recent subsidence is suggested by the character of the coastal scenery of the Barra Isles. Peat was observed to pass under high-water mark in a small inlet near Bruernish. No raised beaches are found along the shores of these Islands. At the north-east end of Barra, where the coast is deeply indented, some of the tidal inlets suggest a recent irruption of the sea into what, formerly, were fresh-water lochs, as in the case of Loch Obe. The encroachment of the sea seems to have been assisted partly by erosion along the master joints, and partly by subsidence. The structure of the islands and the configuration of the adjacent sea-floor are remarkably indicative of a sunken area. And it would appear as though the Sounds separating the larger of the Barra Isles, as well as the channels dividing the innumerable islands to the north and east of Barra, were submerged valleys.

For a more learned account of the geology of these regions one should consult the reports by Messrs. Jehu and Craig in the *Transactions of the Royal Society of Edinburgh*.

GLOSSARY

Agley, amiss, off the straight.

Airt, direction, way.

Arles, money paid as an earnest ; a sum paid by an employer, or by an agent on his behalf, to an employee when engaging the latter's services.

Assoilzied, absolved, acquitted.

Aye, always, constantly, still ; also "yes."

Bannock, a flat cake, usually of oatmeal, baked on a girdle.

Bent, machar-grass.

Bevy, a flock of birds (usually quails) ; a company, especially one of ladies.

Bide, tarry, remain, wait.

Birlinn, the galley or barge of a West Highland chieftain.

Bodach, an old man.

Bothy, a hut or shack.

Bretwalda, the title applied in Saxon times to Egbert and seven earlier kings whose superiority was recognised to a greater or lesser degree by other rulers.

Cailleach, an old woman.

Cautioner, one who finds bail or security for another, or advances a sum of money as surety for good behaviour.

Ceilidh, a social gathering, usually held round the peat fire, for the telling of tales and the singing of songs. *Ceilidhing*, being present at the house of another on such a mission.

Clachan, a little village ; a hamlet.

Compear, to appear before a court in answer to a citation. *Compearance*, attendance in answer to such.

Courie, a shell belonging to a genus

of gasteropods, once used extensively in Africa and Asia as a medium of exchange ; a wee shell.

Crannog, the name given in Scotland and Ireland to a fortified island (partly natural and partly artificial) in a lake, once used as a dwelling-place and place of refuge.

Cronie, a good old friend.

Crowdie, a mixture of pure curd with butter ; a kind of cheese common in the Highlands and Islands.

Dreich, dreary, dull, wearisome.

Dun, a fort or castle ; a stronghold.

Eisd ! Listen !

Eldritch, unearthly, uncanny, weird.

Farlin, the box or trough out of which the gutters take the her-rings.

Fornent, *forneinst*, opposite, facing, over against.

Furth, forth, distant, beyond the bounds of.

Galore, abundance, in plenty (corruption of the Gaelic, *gu leòir*).

Gist, the pith or main point of a matter ; the drift or hang of a subject.

Glebe, the land belonging to a parish church. *Glebe-house*, a manse.

Haddies, haddocks.

Keeking, peeping.

Kelp, the calcined ashes of seaweed, from which soda, iodine, etc., are extracted.

Kenspeckle, readily recognised from some distinguishing mark ; conspicuous.

Kist, a chest, wooden box.

Knowe, a knoll ; a grassy hillock.

Lazy-bed, a bed for growing potatoes, etc., the seed being laid on the surface and covered with earth dug out of ditches or trenches along both sides.

Lochlann, Norway, Scandinavia.

Lochlannaich, *Lochlanners*, a term frequently applied in the West Highlands and Islands to the Northmen.

Lyon King-of-Arms, the official who presides over the Lyon Court in Scotland, having jurisdiction in questions relating to heraldry and precedence.

Machar, an extensive grassy and sandy beach ; the low-lying and often boggy lands near the shore, which afford a certain amount of pasturage for cattle and horses.

Mak siccar, make sure or secure. When Robert the Bruce hurried out of the Church of the Minorites, in Dumfries, after having slain the Red Comyn (John Comyn of Badenoch), he met Kirkpatrick, to whom he is believed to have said, "I must be off, for I doubt I have slain the Red Comyn." Thereupon Kirkpatrick, eager to "mak siccar," rushed into the church and killed the Red Comyn outright.

Milch, giving milk.

Mools, a grave, the earth of a grave, dust.

Overwrought, overworked.

Poind-folded, seized and impounded ; the placing of stray cattle, sheep, etc., in an enclosure.

Raid, a road for ships.

Riever, a robber, pirate, freebooter.

Sassenach, a term habitually applied by Highlanders to a Lowlander, sometimes contemptuously ; an Englishman.

Scathe, injury, loss, damage.

Seannachie, a story-teller, historian ; the official recorder of a clan.

Sgeir, a reef, rocky islet, skerry.

Sgian-dubh, a small black knife carried by Highlanders in the hose of the stocking.

Shieling, the shelter or hut in which shepherds, drovers, and others dwell when the cattle are driven to the hills for summer grazing.

Sloc (geology), a pit.

Sorning, exercising the ancient right whereby a chief or landlord was entitled to obtrude himself on others as their uninvited guest.

Sough, a sigh, the sound of wind. *Keep a calm sough*, keep cool and collected.

Soum, the number of cattle and/or sheep to be kept on a pasture in which more than one proprietor or tenant has rights. *Souming*, the proportioning or fixing of such numbers.

Spulzing, *Spulzy-ing*, plundering, sacking, despoiling.

Swee-crook, the "swee-chain" and its hook.

Targe, a small buckler or shield.

Thoft, the rower's seat in a boat.

Tholing, putting up with, enduring, tolerating, suffering.

Toom, empty, lean, bare.

Tryst, an appointment to meet ; an appointed meeting-place ; a pledge or trust.

Uamh, a cave.

Waulking, the rhythmical process by which cloth is stretched and fulled.

Wedder, a wether, a male sheep.

Woodbine, honeysuckle.

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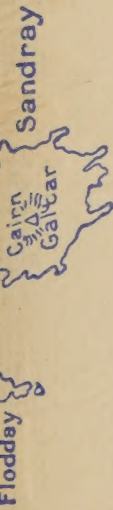
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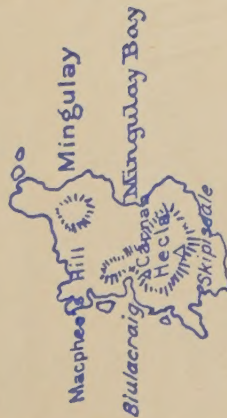
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SOUND OF PABBAY



SOUND OF MINGULAY



SOUND OF BERNERAY



